THE INTERLOPER

E·PHILLIPS·OPPENHEIM

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By

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

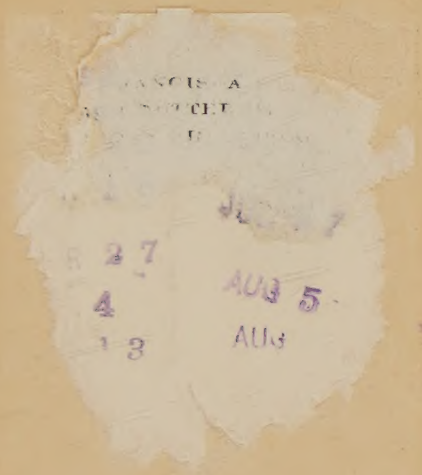
Because of meanness and selfish pride, the Duke of Chatfield had never acknowledged his marriage with a poor but well-born Italian lady who pined away and died in a little Italian town, leaving a son, Francis, embittered by his mother's unhappiness and poverty, and hating anything English and especially his father's family.

Eventually the facts of the Duke's marriage are unearthed and his son comes to England as the head of the House of Chatfield, thus dispossessing the Duke's brother. The young Duke outwardly accepts his new position and possessions with equanimity, but he at once starts out on a curious but carefully planned scheme of living which puzzles and shocks his relations, outrages his social class and deeply hurts his beautiful cousin Monica.

Mr. Oppenheim has drawn a striking picture of a warped and bitter man, who, cleverly concealing his real object, pursues his way without any regard to conventions, to claims of kinship or friendliness or honor, until his behavior acts as a boomerang and he is brought sharply to his senses.

K

Gerald Elbert
12.26.68



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BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

Pietro waved his hand with a grand gesture. He leaned against the rampart and pointed downwards. Many years spent in his profession as semi-mendicant guide had imbued him with a sense of possession in the treasures which he displayed.

"Approach and behold, Signor and Signorina," he invited the two young people who were his temporary victims. "The parapet is strong. One may lean against it."

"My God, what a climb!" the young man exclaimed breathlessly.

"But what a view!" his sister murmured.

They were on the summit of the hill of Pellini. A few hundred feet below was the ancient hill town from which they had climbed, and all around them, like a sea in the fading light, one of the plains of central Italy; a hardly tilled land, sparse of vegetation but full of colour — a land of vineyard and olive trees; brown meadowland on which thin cattle were feeding. Pietro pointed to a shoulder of the hill immediately below them, on the far edge of which was a long grey-stone building — a building obviously ecclesiastical in character, approached by a long cypress-bordered drive, and with a familiar cross on the steep mound behind.

"From this point, gracious Signorina and Signor,"

Pietro continued, "you may behold one of the most magnificent views in central Italy. If you will move to where I am standing and look down, you see first of all the famous Monastery of St. Joseph — a building which has been occupied without interruption by monks of the same order since fourteen hundred and seventy-two. Beyond ——"

The girl interrupted him with a little gesture. She was a tourist, but she was not fond of guides.

"No more historical facts, please," she begged. "I just want to look at the view."

"Regular gas bag, this fellow," her brother grumbled, lighting a cigarette. "I had enough of him down in the town."

The girl leaned the tips of her fingers upon the top of the rampart. She was tall and very beautiful. The slight air of listlessness which detracted occasionally from the charm of her expression had completely vanished. She was gazing out towards the horizon with a look of soft content in her clear brown eyes. Her lips were parted. She was still rather breathless.

"Did you ever see such colouring, Eustace?" she exclaimed. "Look at the saffron light behind the olive trees there, the blue mist in the distance, and those fingers of purple cloud!"

Her brother gazed complacently around.

"Jolly fine building that monastery, too," he remarked. "Seems in a bit better repair than most of them. I bet there are trout in that stream," he added, leaning a little farther over to watch the clear torrent below.

Pietro, who had been inclined to sulk, recovered himself. After all, they were of the nobility and very wealthy — this beautiful young woman and her brother.

He had overheard their chauffeur's conversation in the courtyard of the hotel.

"I tell you all about these things, gracious lady and Signor, if you letta me," he reminded them gently. "The Hill of Calvary ——"

The girl interrupted him again, more firmly than ever this time.

"Not a word," she insisted. "If we want to know anything, we will ask questions. Listen!"

From behind the grey walls below there stole upwards the most marvellously blended music in the world — the music of men's voices singing to the strains of a great organ. The melody rose and fell and died away. The girl listened, entranced.

"Thank heavens that women haven't voices like that," she exclaimed. "I might be tempted to enter a nunnery."

"You letta me speak, and I tell you something interesting," Pietro proposed.

"Go ahead then," the young man assented.

"Twice a year," Pietro confided, "novices are admitted to the monastery. The night before they spend in prayer — here, upon this rampart."

"Why here?" the girl enquired.

"This is the boundary of the town," Pietro explained. "Beyond the wall, all the land that you can see belongs to the monastery. The novice, he prays here upon the borderland. At sunrise the monks come up by that winding path and fetch him. They open that gate in the wall there and he passes through. To-night is one of the nights."

"Do you mean that there will be novices praying here to-night?" she asked.

"Francis will come from the city below," Pietro an-

nounced. "He has been long making up his mind, but they say that he will come."

"And who is Francis?"

"He is an orphan. His mother had a little villa in the bend of the hills. Now she is dead and Francis has come to live in the city. They say that his father was English."

The girl listened for a moment and frowned.

"Here come the rest of them!" she exclaimed. "Sir Stephen and mother between them are driving me crazy with their passion for dates and archæology. Let's climb up to the top of the hill, Eustace."

Her brother shook his head. He had the air of an athlete but he was scarcely in the best of condition. His cheeks were puffy and his forehead was damp.

"Not another yard, Monica," he declared. "I'm not in form for these Alpine feats. I shall go back to the town and see if I can find an interesting café. There's a promising one just outside the garage. You can come down with the others."

"Idiot!" she scoffed. "You desert a view like this for sweet vermouth and a pair of black eyes! I saw her looking at you over the muslin blinds. A happy adventure to you! I'm off!"

She turned to follow a footpath on the opposite side of the road. Her brother sauntered towards the little group who had just appeared around the bend: an elderly gentleman of severely aristocratic appearance, a comfortable-looking lady, very much out of breath, and a middle-aged, fussy-looking man in a grey Norfolk coat and knickerbockers, grey worsted stockings and thick shoes. Each of the newcomers was true to type. The gentleman who affected the costume of a hardy pedestrian was Sir Stephen Dobelle, head of the

firm of Dobelle, Miles & Dobelle, solicitors of Lincoln's Inn, and his two companions were Henry, eighth Duke of Chatfield and Susan his wife. Pietro hastened towards them, hat in hand.

"The noble lady has done well to give herself the fatigue of climbing," he declared. "From the ramparts here is the most extensive view of middle Italy. On the right behold the Monastery of St. Joseph. Note well the Calvary behind. It has been called the most beautiful in the world."

The Duchess leaned against one of the buttresses and fanned herself vigorously.

"Don't talk to me about the view, my good man, for a few minutes!" she exclaimed. "I'm terribly out of breath! Henry, I shall have to let a doctor examine my heart directly we get back."

"It would be as well, my dear," he conceded.

The two men walked to the edge of the ramparts and gazed downwards.

"The fellow's right! It's a damned fine view," Sir Stephen announced.

"Quite a panorama," the Duke acquiesced graciously. "By the bye, Dobelle," he went on, after a moment's pause, "I have been wondering why the name of this place seemed so familiar. Wasn't it round in these parts — er — er ——"

"Precisely," Sir Stephen interrupted. "It was somewhere in this locality that your brother, the late Duke, sought romance and grew olives with a beautiful Italian lady. I had letters from him often bearing this postmark."

"One feels almost an intruder to have blundered upon the spot," the Duke murmured.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"The lady died a short time before your brother," he observed. "There was some small property here, I believe, but we thought it best in the interests of the family to make no enquiries. The estate could spare it."

The Duchess had risen from her stony seat and came towards them.

"I must get away from this man," she declared. "Can't some one stop him? He is boring me to death."

"Dear Duchess, you cannot stop him," Sir Stephen rejoined. "It's the only way an Italian ever works — with his tongue. He's paid to tell us all about this place, and he'll do it whether we listen or not."

"But I don't see why I should be the only victim," she complained.

The word offended Pietro — or perhaps he thought simulated offence the easiest way to the pocket of these wealthy English.

"Victim!" he repeated. "The signora is unkind. You not like me tell you about the place?"

"Your services in leading us to this spot were appreciated and will be remunerated," Sir Stephen promised. "Now that we are here, however, your job is finished."

"Very well," Pietro replied with dignity. "I say no more. I would have spoken of Francis. You shall not hear of him."

The Duchess turned away.

"I feel that Francis would be the last straw," she confessed. "Give me your arm, Henry. I have had enough of sight-seeing. I think that I shall rest for an hour or so before dinner. By the bye, where is Monica?"

"On the rocks, there," Sir Stephen answered, point-

ing upwards, "scrambling about like a young goat. I'll wait for her."

"Don't let her stay too long," her mother enjoined. "There's quite a cold wind already, and it will be dark in half an hour. Call to her if she doesn't come down."

"I will. — Here, Pietro!"

Pietro, who had started to follow his retreating patrons, retraced his steps. The lawyer waited until the other two were out of earshot.

"What about this Francis?" he enquired.

"He come here to-night to pray," the guide confided. "At dawn the door there will open and he will pass down the path."

"To the monastery?"

"To the life that is death."

His questioner scratched his chin meditatively.

"Tell me, Pietro," he enquired, "why did you think that we should be interested in Francis?"

Pietro shrugged his shoulders.

"Because," he replied, "Francis is English like you, and," pointing after the descending figures, "tall like him."

"Is that all?"

Pietro shrugged his shoulders once more. He was impatient to follow his patrons.

"What more should there be, Signor?"

He slunk off. The lawyer turned round and gazed thoughtfully across the plain. It was curious that a breakdown to one of the cars should have delayed them at this particular place. Once or twice during the last few years he had half decided to make some enquiries — and yet, what was the use? From the fact that his late client had left behind him no instructions, it became manifest what his wishes were. And yet in the

lawyer's mind there had always been that slight feeling of uneasiness. He brooded upon the matter until he was suddenly conscious that there were dark patches of semi-obscurity hovering over the landscape, that shadows seemed to be crawling down from the hills, and that above him a star had appeared. He looked up to the rocks to call for Lady Monica and found a young man standing a few feet away, gazing at him enquiringly — a young man, tall and slight, with black hair, unusual features and scowling expression. Sir Stephen stared at him, entirely bereft of words. The coming of this intruder was without a doubt a shock.

"It is late for sight-seers," the latter pointed out coldly. "You had better descend or you may lose your way."

Sir Stephen recovered himself.

"Do you mind telling me your name?" he asked.

"The question is impertinent but I will answer it if it will rid me of your presence sooner. My name is Francis and I came here to be alone."

"Your other name?"

"I have none."

"But you are English," his questioner persisted. "You must have another name."

The scowl on the other's face deepened into passion. His eyes — cold grey eyes they were — flashed.

"I am not English," he declared.

"But my dear fellow ——"

"You are making yourself very offensive," the young man interrupted. "I beg that you will leave me alone. This night is not my own."

Sir Stephen had recovered his composure. To him the occasion had become a serious one.

"On the contrary," he pointed out, "if what they

tell me is true, this is the last night you can call your own. I wish to speak to you."

"Say what you have to say, and go then," was the curt admonition.

"I wish to speak to you of your father," the lawyer announced. "You see, I know quite well who you are. I knew your father when he was your age."

To a casual observer the anger seemed to have passed from the young man's face. His expression had become tense and drawn. There was still, however, the fever in his eyes.

"I should advise you," he said, "to hold your peace. You have reminded me that I am still of the earth — a layman and free to do as I will. If I thought that you were a friend of my father, do you know what I should be tempted to do?"

"Well?"

"To throw you over the ramparts. You see that corner. There is a sheer fall of three hundred feet there."

Sir Stephen was no coward. He remained absolutely unmoved.

"Is that the spirit which you are going to take with you down there?" he asked, pointing to the monastery.

"It is the spirit which was born with me," was the measured reply. "I seek refuge there because if I remain outside those walls I shall commit a crime."

The lawyer had lost all his mannerisms. He was a kind-hearted man and he was deeply interested.

"Francis," he said, "if what I suspect is true, you are one of those unfortunate children of the world who have been wronged by their parents. But remember they are not always to be blamed."

"Why not?" the young man asked harshly.

"There were reasons at least why your father should have hesitated to marry a peasant girl."

"My mother was not a peasant girl. She was noble, although her father tilled his own land. In England you make nobles of the richest of your shopkeepers and men of commerce. — You see that I am controlling myself, but if you continue to talk to me in this strain please come a little farther away from the edge of the rampart."

"I am not afraid," Sir Stephen assured him. "We have met by accident and I am going to say what I feel that it is my duty to say to you. Why you were left poor and unrecognised I do not know, but at least I can promise you that it was never your father's intention. Every man expects to be able to send a message or add a codicil to his will on his deathbed. Your father died in the hunting field, without a moment's warning. I know what his wish would have been and I am here to carry it into effect, if possible. Give up the idea of this living death. His relatives shall see that you are well provided for. I pledge my word to it."

The young man closed his eyes. He remained silent for a few moments. When he opened them his voice shook a little.

"This is not hesitation," he explained. "I am obliged to pray for your sake. Every word you say makes the blood hot in my veins and sets my hand twitching for a weapon. My fingers should wither before they touched a penny of charity from my father's people."

Sir Stephen was disturbed. He felt that he was making no headway; that he was a poor advocate. His

case was surely a good one, and yet in this young man's presence his brain seemed clouded.

"Francis," he went on, "your father was weak sometimes. He was never wicked. I was his lawyer, his executor — I might almost say, his confidential friend. I am perfectly certain that if he had lived you would have found yourself committed to my care. Cannot you accept the situation in that way? It is a terrible thing for a young man like you to cut yourself off from life. You know what you will find — down there."

"Peace," was the gloomy reply.

"Peace at your age!" Sir Stephen scoffed. "You are too young to make up your mind on such a subject. Give the world at least a trial. You can trust me."

"I trust no one of your speech. Let me show you this."

He drew from the loose pocket of his coat a fifteenth-century weapon in a quaint metal sheath, which he slowly displayed — a very ugly line of quivering blue steel.

"I've seen hundreds of them in the curio shops," the lawyer remarked. "Very interesting, but why carry it about with you?"

"I bought it," the young man confided, "to plunge it into the heart of the first person who ever spoke to me of my father in friendly fashion."

Sir Stephen was a little annoyed. The young man's speech seemed to him to have introduced a needless tone of melodrama into an already sufficiently difficult situation. He pushed the dagger on one side impatiently.

"My young friend," he protested, "this is the language of the past. You must have some common sense

somewhere. I want you to bring it into our conversation."

"Past or present, it is the only tongue I speak," was the steady reply. "If you choose to make a murderer of me you can do so. Then it will be I who will take that three hundred feet drop from the ramparts. I can assure you that I am quite indifferent."

Sir Stephen had a great deal more to say, but he remained dumb. He was a man of instincts, notwithstanding his legal training, and he suddenly realised that this strange young man was in deadly earnest. He even saw the twitch of his fingers, read the growing purpose in his brain. He turned away.

"I am sorry," he said. "You are making a great mistake."

Francis made no reply. He stood listening for some time to the reluctantly retreating footsteps. Then he fell on his knees with his arms folded upon the rampart wall. Below, the harsh tinkling of a bell was summoning the brown-robed toilers from their work on the land.

CHAPTER II

Monica, descending the rocks with light and graceful footsteps, broke off in her song and peered downwards. Pietro stood in the road.

"The gracious signorina should hurry with me to the hotel," he enjoined. "The signor who promised to wait for her forgot. He sent me here. Behold, I have run all the way."

Monica reached the road with a final spring.

"Why should one hurry, Pietro?" she asked carelessly. "This twilight is gorgeous. I have been watching the lights come out on the plain."

"It is not safe to be here at this hour," the guide assured her, looking nervously around.

"Not safe?" she repeated, wonderingly. "Why not?"

"There are thieves who dwell in the hills above, — thieves who come out only in the darkness."

"Pooh!" Monica scoffed. "I'm not afraid of thieves. Hurry on down if you're afraid, Pietro. I want to watch these lights from the ramparts. Every moment a new one flashes out; a little point of fire being pushed through a purple cloak. Goodness gracious! Who's that?"

She pointed to where the figure of Francis was dimly visible. Pietro crossed himself fervently.

"Behold the Englishman," he whispered. "It is his night of prayer and fasting. At dawn they will open the gates of the monastery to him. He will be a holy man."

"Are you sure that he is English?" Monica queried.

"His father was English. His mother was the daughter of a vine grower in the valley. — Signorina," he went on, "I beseech you to hurry. It is not well to be here."

Monica found the situation, as well as the environment, interesting.

"An Englishman," she repeated. "Pietro, I think I will speak to him. He must be mad to think of burying himself for life — a young man, too."

Pietro was genuinely shocked. These English might be wealthy but they were without sentiment — worse, they were sacrilegious.

"Signorina," he urged, "you must not disturb him at his prayers."

Monica laughed softly.

"Why not? He will have plenty of time to pray later on. I believe you are thinking of those thieves all the time, Pietro. Go on, if you're afraid. I will catch you up presently."

"I am not afraid, but there are most certainly thieves in the neighbourhood," he mumbled. "I will take a glass of vermouth at the corner café. It is almost within sight. The signorina will not delay."

He hurried off. Monica glanced after him for a moment contemptuously. Then she moved under the shelter of a little clump of olive trees. At first she contented herself with gazing at the panorama below. Then she began to hum to herself, finally to sing. The light of mischief crept into her eyes. Her voice was not powerful but she knew how to make it thrilling. She sang of love — love, pagan, but beautiful. At the further end of the rampart, out of sight now, in the gathering darkness, the young man prayed.

Monica broke off in her song, disturbed by the sound of shuffling footsteps. She stared at the two men who had apparently appeared out of nowhere. She found the contemplation entirely unpleasant. They were dirty, distinctly of villainous appearance, and they smelled horribly of garlic.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

They had apparently no time to explain. Her hands were already seized. She felt rude fingers at the fastening of her pearl necklace.

"Help!" she cried.

The monosyllable was all that was permitted to her. It was enough, however. She was still struggling against the supreme indignity of the brown fingers holding together her lips, when help came. She had a sudden vision of one of her assailants rolling over and over in the dust — she heard the thud of bone against flesh as the other staggered backwards, with his hands to his face. There was the glimmer of steel; then a yell of agony as her rescuer seized the robber's wrist. A moment later a gleam of light flashed in the pool of darkness as the dagger was thrown over the rampart. The two men were crawling up the rocks like rats.

"Have they taken anything?" Francis asked quickly.

Monica felt her neck and wrists.

"Nothing at all," she replied. "Please don't follow them. I should hate to be left here alone."

The young man drew back a step or two.

"There is no longer any occasion for fear," he assured her. "You had better return at once to your hotel."

Monica looked doubtfully along the road. It seemed to have grown darker during the last few minutes.

"You couldn't walk down with me, could you?" she

suggested with a smile which would have turned the heads of a great many young men who were bemoaning her absence in London.

"No."

It was a curt, distinctly a rude monosyllable. Monica, however, ignored its implied reproof.

"Why not? My father would like so much to thank you, and it is dark, isn't it?"

"I have — occupation here," he replied. "Pietro is awaiting you at the bend of the road. You will be quite safe thus far."

She seated herself on the edge of the rampart.

"Perhaps if I stay here," she said, "Pietro will come."

"It is time that you returned to your friends," he declared coldly. "You may not know it, but you are breaking the unwritten law of the place. These few yards are consecrate to me and my purpose."

Monica nodded.

"Yes, I know all about that," she admitted. "There's plenty of time, though, isn't there? I should like to talk to you."

"Signorina, I have nothing to say," he rejoined, a little wearily. "My conversations with my fellow creatures are passed. I beg you to leave me."

Monica pointed downwards to where the outline of the monastery was now scarcely distinguishable.

"Is it true that you are going there?" she asked.

"It is true," he assented. "Your presence here interferes with my devotions. These are my last hours before peace comes."

"Are you sure that you will find peace there?" she queried.

"I hope. No one can do more."

She gazed at him steadfastly as one seeking for understanding.

"But why do you seek peace?" she demanded. "You, a young man whose life lies all before you? Peace is the last goal of those who have fought and suffered, those for whom the end is at hand."

"Signorina," he urged, "I beg that you will leave me."

She took a cigarette from her little gold case, tapped it against the stone and coolly lit it. He watched her with displeased but fascinated eyes.

"If I disobey," she told him, "it is because I feel kindly towards you. You have shown that you are brave. You are a man. You are not like those shadowy abstractions down there — ghostlike creatures, with water in their veins for blood and a palsy upon their limbs. Surely it is a sin for one young and vigorous like you to desert before the trumpet call is sounded."

"Signorina, you speak with great ignorance," he assured her. "What do you know of my life and sufferings? I have lived for twenty-two years. Look at me. Is there no sorrow in my face?"

"You look as though you had had trouble," she admitted. "But trouble at your age should pass. You are English and you have done me a great service. My father would wish, I am sure, to thank you. Between us we might be able to suggest a more reasonable vocation for you."

"Signorina," he protested, "I do not wish to leave this place. I do not wish to walk for one yard by your side. I do not wish to meet your father. The time passes, and it passes ill for me. I beg that you will go."

"You're terribly obstinate," Monica sighed.

"I seem obstinate," he retorted, "because it pleases you to argue with me when you know nothing of my life or motive. I take orders to save myself from sin, but if it pleases you to know it, know this — that I shall carry down that path with me into my cell a passion which lives, and will live with me day and night; a passion which in this world has turned my life into a burning fever. It will take all the prayers of my empty days, all the holiness I can possibly find there, to cool the lust of anger which is in my heart."

"You have suffered some great wrong?" she ventured.

"Another has suffered it," he answered. "I am her son."

"I am sorry," she acknowledged gently. "Believe me, I am very sorry for you indeed, and yet — listen. What happiness will you gain down there, brooding, praying and wrestling with shadows? Have you never thought of the joy of life?"

"Joy?" he repeated doubtfully.

"Why not?" she demanded. "Joy is the heritage of youth. Didn't you hear me singing to you just now?"

"I heard a song," he replied harshly. "It disturbed my prayers."

She leaned a little forward. In the purple twilight her face seemed more than ever beautiful and alluring. There was a promise of passion in her compelling eyes.

"Don't you believe that you will hear the echoes of that song down there behind those grey walls as long as you are young and strong?" she persisted. "Do

you think that you can close your ears to it? Why should you? It isn't a sin to be happy."

"Where in this world should I find happiness?" he asked bitterly.

She moved closer towards him. There was indeed something almost sirenlike in her expression, half pleading, half mocking, yet with a foundation of earnestness.

"From one of us," she whispered. "We were born to bring it to you. Why not come out into the world and seek the most wonderful thing in life?"

"The most wonderful thing in life?" he repeated. "What is that?"

"Love," she murmured.

"Pagan love," he retorted fiercely. "I think that the devil must have brought you here to-night, of all nights."

She laughed softly. Was it possible that victory was coming her way, after all?

"I can assure you that it was a very comfortable Rolls-Royce. Something went wrong with the magneto of my brother's two-seater so we had to spend the night here. Are you glad?"

"No," he declared fiercely.

"You should be. And I am not in the least a pagan. If I were, I should not be so sorry for those poor men down there who fancy that they can reach holiness by flying from temptation. I didn't think that sane people even considered such a thing nowadays."

He looked moodily downwards.

"I go there," he told her, "for a different reason. I go there because if I live in the world I shall commit murder."

"My dear man, why?" she asked.

"It is not your business," he answered coolly.

Monica learned then how much noise Pietro could make when he was no longer afraid. He came rushing up the hill, followed by two Italian policemen. He waved a thick stick in his hand and his ejaculations were bloodthirsty.

"The signorina is safe, then?" he cried. "Oh, how I have rushed to her aid. Which way did the thieves go?"

Monica looked at him with distaste.

"I really did not notice. All I know is that they would have had my jewellery if it had not been for this young gentleman."

"The scoundrels!" Pietro exclaimed. "Down there, whilst I was waiting, I fancied that I heard a cry. I rushed to where these two policemen were stationed. We tore up the hill."

"Wonderful!" Monica remarked sarcastically. "Since you are here, however, you can wait and escort me back."

She moved nearer to Francis. He had fallen once more on his knees and was murmuring a prayer to himself.

"Please listen to me," she begged.

He remained like a statue. His eyes were fast closed, the words came breathlessly from his lips.

"Just one moment," she pleaded.

He took no notice. The policemen, talking together angrily, pushed Pietro towards her. They made the sign of the cross.

"Gracious Signorina," the latter remonstrated. "He is now a man apart. He should not be disturbed."

"It is very sad," Monica murmured.

"Come away, Signorina," Pietro insisted. "My companions here, who helped to rescue you, will inter-

fere if you do not. He must be left to himself. All through the night he stays like that. It is the custom of centuries."

"And afterwards?"

"With the dawn the gates of the monastery are opened. The fathers themselves will come and fetch him. The devout will watch from the city walls."

Monica turned sadly away.

"It is a great tragedy," she sighed.

CHAPTER III

Monica was conscious, during those few hours spent at the quaint little Italian hill town, of a curious feeling of isolation, of removal from any form of sympathetic contact with any one of her companions. She seemed suddenly to be breathing a different atmosphere, to be almost passionately anxious to escape from the humdrum conversation of the table, from the tourist-like proclivities of her mother who insisted upon buying picture postcards, and her father and Sir Stephen who wandered out to find a decent café. Dinner itself was a curious meal, served in a large, chilly-looking apartment, with a stone floor and bare walls. There was a long table in the middle of the room at which were gathered a sprinkling of tradespeople, commercial travellers, and wine growers. Monica and her party occupied one of the side tables, of which there were several. Next to them three priests ate with garrulous content; farther on were two or three Americans, and in the corner an artist and his wife. As the meal progressed the smell of the food and the heat of the closed stove became almost insufferable, and, as soon as she could, Monica made her escape into the little courtyard, with its queer pieces of statuary and cracked tiles. Up above was a wonderful pool of deep blue sky, with an amazing setting of stars, and in the middle of the square was an orange tree, whose fragrance made the stagnant air almost faint. On the other side of the wall was a row of dark cypress trees — black pencils against the clear sky. Monica lit a cigarette

and sat upon a stone seat. Presently Eustace came out and joined her.

"The car's all right," he announced. "We're going to start at nine o'clock. Let's stroll round and have a look at the place."

Monica followed him gladly enough out into the street. Again she felt that curious sense of isolation which had crept over her at dinner time. Every shutter was closed. The city with its narrow streets and tall grey-stone houses was like a city of the dead. Even Eustace seemed a creature from another world.

"Rummy old place to be stranded at," he observed. "Might have been worse, though. The beds are all right, and the dinner wasn't bad."

"How about the lady at the café?" she enquired.

Eustace groaned.

"Terrible!" he admitted. "These foreign places are all the same. They promise you no end and give you nothing. She was fat, had yellow teeth and couldn't speak a word of English. Think I shall turn in early. What do you say?"

"I wonder what's become of the people?" she speculated. "They can't go to bed so early as this."

"Making merry behind closed doors and blinds, I expect," he remarked. "You can see light through the chinks of many of these shutters. There's music going on at some of the places, too. Jolly inhospitable, I call it."

Monica stopped short. On their left was a narrow passageway with a descending flight of stone steps — a passageway which seemed like a gash cloven through the mass of incongruous grey-stone buildings. At the far end was a strange little segment of panorama — a glimpse of the lights, few and far between, in the val-

ley below. It seemed as though from the end of the passage one stepped off into a pool of space.

"That must lead to the city wall, Eustace. Let's go," she suggested.

He followed her lazily. The way was longer than it seemed, unlit and gloomy. At the end, however, they were rewarded. They ascended a few unexpected and remarkably steep steps and were on the ramparts.

"It's like leaning over the side of an airship," Monica declared.

"It makes me giddy," Eustace grumbled.

"If only there were a moon," she sighed, looking doubtfully into the great gulf below.

Where vision was denied her, however, sound intervened. From the quaint little cathedral which they had visited earlier in the day came the sound of the chiming of the hour, of a musical peal of time-mellowed bells. The notes had scarcely died away when, from farther off, came the harsh clanging of the monastery bell. Monica leaned forward eagerly. There were a few faint lights burning there. Above must be the hill. Was he still praying, she wondered, the solitary figure she had left battling with his misery? What were his thoughts? Had he really faith enough to believe that salvation in this world at any rate could come from the inertia of life? To what heights had he raised himself during these hours? Men had told her that the sound of her voice and the sight of her were hard things to forget. She had willed that he should find it so. Had she succeeded — ever so little?

"Let's be moving," Eustace suggested, yawning.

They made their way back through the slumbering city. Monica found a sleepy woman to show her to her room — a large, strangely empty apartment, into

whose further recesses the fluttering illumination of the solitary candle could scarcely penetrate. The walls were of light-coloured but ancient wood, pierced here and there with worm-holes. In the far corner was a small shrine, a roughly executed wooden image of the Virgin. Monica gazed at it for some moments thoughtfully. The sight of it seemed somehow to complete her unsettlement. She lay down at last and tried to sleep. For an hour or so, perhaps, she dosed. Then she was as wide awake as though it were midday. The room was in pitch darkness, but through the open window opposite she could see the glimmering of a single street lamp. She stretched out her hand and lit the candle. By degrees the various objects in the room began to assume their natural shapes. As she lay there, the sense of isolation seemed to come back to her with renewed conviction. She felt as though, without warning, she had arrived at a break in her life — a break as abrupt and complete as the fall from that little flight of stone steps in the town into the sleeping gulf below. She seemed to look back a long distance, even to recent events. Her presentation at Court, her first ball, her life of easy luxury, almost splendour, punctuated by one or two very one-sided love affairs. There was no man in her life of whom she found herself even able to think. The larger, more vital problems of existence had scarcely even presented themselves to her. They loomed up suddenly in that silent hour — problems of life and death, of right-doing and wrong-doing. She had no past but there was a future, which seemed to her at that moment almost menacing. Was life meant to be taken seriously — as anything but a game? If so, not only she but every one of her kind was walking in the darkness. Be-

yond that light which she could see from her pillow, somewhere a little higher up, Francis must still be praying on the ramparts. His was a madman's device to escape the problems of life, but a sense of the mistaken spirituality of it suddenly seized her. This poor fool had something which she had missed — saw greater things in his narrow dreams than had ever come to her. She loved luxury, fine clothing, beautiful surroundings, and easy ways. What had she as a corrective — she, or the others? Nothing? Four o'clock chimed from the Cathedral bells. Already the darkness outside was less intense. Suddenly, as it seemed to her, without volition, certainly without any attempt at making up her mind, she sprang out of bed and began to dress. It was the first time in her life that she had ever risen in such a way, but she accepted it entirely as a matter of course. She twisted her thick coils of brown hair into their place with nervous fingers. Without knowing why, she felt that she was in a hurry. She stole down the stone stairs on tiptoe, tried one door after another, until she found one unlocked, then stole into the street. She had almost to grope her way out of the town. As she began to climb, however, she found the darkness had gone. A new twilight seemed to envelop her — a twilight of grey and silver. Birds were singing in all the trees. Eastwards there was a lightening in the sky — the dawn even of colour. A finger of faint pink grew wider as she watched. She hastened on. A peasant's cart met her on its way into the town, full of vegetables and country produce. The man in charge raised himself from his recumbent position to gaze at her in amazement as she passed by. There was a line of green now underneath the pink and a thin clear shaft of saffron be-

neath that. She quickened her pace. This was the dawn coming. She feared that she might be too late — for what? . . . Everything seemed as she had left it when she reached the little lone fragment of the ramparts. The young man was still on his knees, recumbent, a shapeless mass with his black cloak around him. She moved swiftly to his side and stood there for a moment. The murmur of words ceased from his lips. He looked up — saw her and struggled to his feet. There were lines under his eyes. His night's vigil seemed to have aged him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked harshly.

"All through the night," she told him, "I have lain sleepless. I could not get you out of my thoughts. I felt that I must speak to you once more before it was too late."

"Why should you think of me?" he demanded. "We are strangers."

"No two people in this world are strangers," she pleaded. "We are fellow creatures following a common way. I have done nothing but think since I left you. Last night I spoke too lightly. I reasoned foolishly. This morning — listen — I am as serious as you."

"You spoke to me of love and the joys of living," he muttered. "I want none of them."

"I was wrong," she admitted. "It is not for the sake of pleasure alone that I want you to turn your back upon that gate. I am very ignorant and I know that I am the wrong person to plead with you, but you know, they say sometimes that children see the light where their elders fail. I want to remind you that every human being is born into the world with a purpose. He has his battle to fight in life, his work to

accomplish, his place to take amongst his fellows. Life down there is an abstraction and a shadow. There is nothing noble about it. You avoid evil but you reject the good. I would have you take up the burden of your life, whatever it may be, and live it in the sight of all men. That is how one may reach holiness."

She ceased, breathless. Her thoughts travelled so swiftly that time seemed to stand still. It was the most serious moment she had ever experienced. She felt her heart beating madly. He himself was moved in some way. His face was upturned. His eyes still avoided her, but his lips were quivering. Eastwards the sky now had become a bank of glory. She sought for words, passionately conscious of his hesitation. Then the silence in the valley below was broken. As though a door had been opened and a flood of melody released, there came to them the roll of an organ, the far-off sound of men's voices chanting a prayer. There was a change in the young man's face. He listened intently. His lips moved to the music. Somehow or other she found her breath again. Words came to her.

"Francis," she pleaded, "that is the music to help your footsteps when you pass across the borderline from life to death. It isn't meant for the solace of those whose work is undone. Listen, I am not tempting you. I am not begging you to turn away from that gate to seek the easier ways of pleasure and idleness. I ask you — I implore you — to come and do a man's work in the world and earn the peace which comes with accomplishment. The path you choose now is the path of cowards. The music to which you listen is a narcotic for the soul."

Still he made no answer. The music drew nearer and nearer. The monks were ascending the hill. Behind, a

little line of peasants' carts were passing. The men and women crossed themselves as they looked towards Francis and scowled at Monica. None of them lingered, however. All the time Francis watched the gate. There was terror in his eyes — terror and frantic hope. The first shaft of quivering sunlight stole down upon his suddenly aged face. Monica realised that with the passing of the night his lips were sealed. She spoke again but this time hopelessly.

"Francis, can't you forget that I am a woman? It isn't my voice that calls you. It isn't my arm that would draw you away. It's duty, Francis. There is no life for a man beyond that gate."

The voices now seemed to be close at hand, on the other side of the wall. The chant ended in a little burst of solemn but glorious melody. Slowly the iron gate was opened by some unseen hand. The voices died away. There was a deep silence. Francis, with a gesture which might almost have been of despair, turned towards the open portal. Once more she cried out. This time her voice was more natural and more human.

"Francis, turn round!" she implored. "If you won't stay for duty's sake, stay for mine. Francis!"

He came to a standstill. He was still a yard from the gates. Monica tried to call out once more, but there was a sob in her throat. The singing recommenced, softly at first, as though from the throats of boys. Her eyes were blurred with tears. She dashed them away. In that moment Francis had disappeared. The gate was closed. Once more the chant swelled in volume — louder and louder and more triumphant it grew. As Monica listened her face hardened. She moved forward to the edge of the ramparts and looked downwards. She watched the little procession of monks

threading their way down the precipitous path, Francis walking alone, behind. She watched them, dry-eyed, but with a surge of curious emotion, unanalysable even by herself. Only she knew that some vital possibility seemed to have dropped out of her life, that she had stepped back, a little bruised and scarred, from an experience which was still inexplicable to her, to the ways of a life which, in a sense, would never seem the same again.

CHAPTER IV

So far as a nobleman of ancient lineage, excellent breeding and sufficient understanding could be said to be a snob, Henry Duke of Chatfield was a snob as regards his own relations and the relations of his family with Royalty. He spent a very pleasant few minutes in his study one fine April morning some three years after his tour amongst the hill towns of Italy, turning over the pages of the *Tatler* and studying photographs of his daughter Monica attended by an obviously devoted princeling. There had been paragraphs in the daily papers too, hints in various society columns. The whole thing was exceedingly flattering. Monica could scarcely have chosen a more fortunate moment for her descent upon him.

"Busy, Dad, or can I have a word with you?" she asked.

"Never too busy, my dear, to see you," he assured her, rising and resting his hand upon the back of a chair. "You are riding this morning, I see," he added with a glance at her habit.

She nodded, threw herself into the easy-chair, crossed her legs and lit a cigarette. In any one else the attitude and action taken in conjunction would have seemed a little risky. Lady Monica, however, was fast establishing a law of her own.

"Dad," she said, "I'm awfully sorry, but I want some money."

In a way this was rather a shock. Eighty thousand a year with four large houses to keep up, tenants to

propitiate, and an extravagant son, is by no means an enormous income. The Duke, however, was a philosopher, and he was intensely proud of his daughter.

"Well, my dear, if you want it, you must have it," he replied. "Clothes, I suppose?"

"Clothes and gambling," she admitted coolly. "One must amuse oneself."

He winced.

"I'm not sure that the gambling is worth while," he remarked. "I know it can't be avoided now and then, and personally I see no harm in it, although it doesn't happen to be one of my vices. I'd leave it out as much as I could, though. An unmarried girl can't possibly compete with the people she may run up against."

Monica assented languidly.

"Oh, I just play when I feel like it. I'd prefer to dance, only all the men worth spending an hour or two with dance so badly. A thousand will do, Dad. My allowance will be due next month, won't it?"

The Duke produced his cheque-book with some reluctance. He made out the cheque, however, and passed it across.

"There you are, my dear," he said. "Make it last as long as you can. Whom are you riding with this morning?"

"I forget," she confessed. "Some young man is calling for me presently."

He stood looking down at her. Amongst those human weaknesses which he permitted to disturb the prim regularity of his life, was a distinct affection for his daughter.

"I am not sure that you're looking well, Monica," he observed.

"Entirely a mental indisposition," she assured him. "I'm bored."

"That's queer," he reflected. "Why?"

She made no immediate reply. He shrugged his shoulders as he returned to his seat.

"Every paper I pick up," he continued, "tells me that you are the most popular young woman in society. You take the lead wherever you go. You dabble in philanthropy, in sport, even in politics. There isn't a paper that doesn't proclaim you the reigning beauty amongst the younger set. I really can't see how you find time to be bored."

"Nor can I," she admitted. "But I am."

"You've tried most things," he went on. "There would appear to be only one new experience left for you in life."

"Marriage, I suppose."

"Precisely."

She was silent for a moment. She sat with her face to the window and with the full warmth of the spring sunshine around her. Her father's heart glowed with pride. In all the forty-seven oil paintings of his female ancestry in Chatfield House and Chatfield Castle there was no woman whose beauty could compare with hers.

"Marriage is, I am afraid, where I come to grief," she confessed. "I can't face it, Dad."

"That's strange," he murmured. "You seem, if I may say so, a perfectly normal person."

"I think I am on every other subject," she assented. "I've started no end of new crazes. I'm supposed to be absolutely up to date in most things. But, between you and me, Dad, I'm hopelessly old-fashioned about marriage. I've tried to consider it in connection with several of the men who've asked me, and it seems like a

hideous impropriety. I've been reading Jane Austen and I know exactly why. There must be a right man and I haven't met him."

The Duke coughed. It seemed a delicate matter to discuss even with one's own daughter.

"Your sex, my dear," he observed, "is generally capable of great adaptability in this matter. If a man presents himself who is in every way desirable, it is astonishing how soon the average young woman can discover the existence for him of that remarkable feeling which the novelists are accustomed to call 'love'."

"I know, Dad," Monica agreed, "but I'm not an average young woman. I know, because I've tried. I let a young man kiss me last night, to see if that would help things along. Absolutely horrible, the sensation! I was very disappointed and very rude about it. Besides rubbing all the carmine off my lips!"

The Duke sighed. He guessed at the identity of the young man.

"Well, my dear," he said, "your mother and I are in no hurry to lose you. There are certain connections which would gratify us very much. But that, I think, you know. You must take your own time, however. You realise, of course, that spinsterhood is a most impossible condition?"

She laughed softly.

"It sha'n't be as bad as that, Dad, I promise you."

The butler knocked at the door and entered, announcing the arrival of Monica's illustrious escort. She rose to her feet, gathered up her skirt, threw a kiss at her father and left the room. Her mother joined him and they stood at the window watching her start.

"How much did Monica want this time?" she enquired.

"A thousand," was the gloomy reply. "I had to give it to her, of course. All the same, I wish she'd marry. Won't you sit down, my dear?"

The Duchess seated herself in Monica's vacated chair.

"I mustn't stay," she declared. "I've a great many things to do. Mrs. Marsham has just brought me the books. They're more than ever this month. You'll have to pay in something extra to the housekeeping account."

"Damn the housekeeping account!" the Duke exclaimed testily.

"People must be paid," she sighed.

"Well, overdraw then," he advised. "Monica's cleared me out for a week or so. Upon my word, I wish she'd marry."

"I can't think why she doesn't," the Duchess complained. "Most unnatural, I call it."

"I have just had some conversation with her upon the subject," he confided. "I must confess that she surprised me very much. I should never have considered Monica a sentimentalist."

"I wonder," her mother reflected, "whether you have noticed any change in Monica since our tour abroad three years ago."

"I can't say that I have particularly," he confessed. "What sort of change?"

The Duchess hesitated.

"A very difficult change to put into words. It was when she returned to England or during the next season, perhaps, that she attained her greatest success. She seemed to have developed gifts which surprised me — an amazing capacity for leading people, for do-

ing the most daring things in an entirely irreproachable manner, — and yet she appeared to have lost something. I don't know how to express it, Henry, but I always fancy that there has been a certain hardness about her since that time. She is far more indifferent, for instance, as to the feelings of her admirers."

"I don't know about hardness," the Duke objected; "she was talking what, in any one else, would have seemed sentimental twaddle just before you came in."

"I know," his wife sighed. "I only hope that when her Prince Charming does come along, he won't be an opera singer or a professional cricketer! Underneath her coldness Monica has the most amazing temperament."

"Let us," the Duke suggested, "not meet trouble halfway. I see," he added, looking out of the window, "that Sir Stephen is here. He has asked for an interview this morning."

"I hope none of the tenants are going to be troublesome," she remarked, as she rose to her feet.

He looked for a moment almost severe.

"My dear," he said, "they can be as troublesome as they like. I wouldn't even discuss the matter of another shilling off their rents. What Eustace and I are talking about is cutting the entail and selling the Yorkshire property. There is no house. It doesn't go with the other land. And wherever there isn't a house the tenants give trouble."

"A little ready money would be a wonderful thing," the Duchess confessed, as she moved towards the door. — "How do you do, Sir Stephen," she went on, meeting him on the threshold. "Stay and have some luncheon with us, if you're not in a hurry this morning. You can take Henry for a little walk in the Park first. I

tell him he'll lose his figure if he doesn't take more exercise."

"You're very kind, Duchess," the lawyer replied. "I'm afraid I shall have to go on to the City this morning."

"Well, any time you like. We're generally in for luncheon. Henry prefers to dine out but to lunch in. It's his nap afterwards he thinks about."

She departed, closing the door behind her. The Duke invited his visitor to take an easy-chair.

"Glad to see you, Dobelle," he declared. "Your coming has probably saved me a journey down into the City. I wanted to talk to you about our proposition — selling the Yorkshire property, you know. Eustace is all for it."

"I think you'll have to put the idea out of your mind," was the grave reply. "I — the fact is, Duke, I am afraid I am bringing you very bad news."

"The deuce you are! Don't tell me that my Norfolk people are expecting another reduction. It simply can't be done."

"My business is far more serious," the lawyer pronounced. "Can you bear a shock?"

The Duke was more perplexed than alarmed. He could think of no possible impending calamity.

"Out with it!" he enjoined.

"The Yorkshire estates are not yours to dispose of — or the Norfolk ones, or any of the Chatfield property. Francis married that Italian girl in Rome and had a son. The son is living at the present moment."

The Duke gripped the sides of his chair. The situation was too big for him. He failed to grasp it.

"A son! Francis married!" he exclaimed. "Ridicu-

lous! Why, if that were true, Dobelle, the young man would be Duke of Chatfield!"

"He is," the lawyer affirmed solemnly.

"And what am I?" the Duke gasped.

"Just what you were before, Lord Henry Wobury, uncle of the Duke, and I regret to say, without any settled income."

"God bless my soul!" the bewildered man exclaimed. "We're disinherited then!"

"I regret to say that such is the case," the lawyer assented.

CHAPTER V

On the whole, Lord Henry bore the blow well. He rang the bell for a pint of champagne, most of which he was compelled to drink himself, as the lawyer deprecated any form of alcoholic refreshment before lunch time. Then he asked a great many questions.

"Tell me exactly how you discovered this?"

"It was during a spring cleaning at the office," Sir Stephen explained. "In destroying a lot of worthless papers belonging to the late Duke, we came across several packets of paid cheques returned from the bank. One of these was made out to the chaplain of the English Church in Rome. Pinned to it was a letter, promising attendance for the purpose of performing some ceremony at a certain hour. I did not wish to disturb you unnecessarily so I said nothing about it, but went out to Rome myself. The marriage was in the register and there was also a record of the christening of a boy. I subsequently visited Pellini and had an interview with the Superior of the monastery and with the young man, Francis."

"I always knew there was something wrong about that infernal place," Lord Henry groaned. "Susan was saying only this morning that Monica hasn't been the same girl since we got back from there."

"I had the utmost difficulty with the young man," Sir Stephen continued thoughtfully. "At first he absolutely refused to listen to me. Eventually, however, he handed over a box of papers left by his mother. They contained a copy of the marriage certificate, birth

certificate, and additional evidence which I can only assure you is overwhelming. Even then I found the young man's attitude extraordinary. He seemed to take the slightest possible interest in the fact that his father and mother had been legally married, and the realisation of his own position left him absolutely unmoved."

"He had better stay where he is then," Lord Henry commented.

"That is exactly what at first he proposed to do. However, I pointed out to him where his duty lay and I also pointed out the fact that, whether he returned or not, the estates would have to be administered in his name. Finally the Father Superior got hold of him, and very quickly ended the matter. A Roman Catholic Peer of England was too great an asset to be disregarded. The young man has practically received orders to quit. A special dispensation signed by the Pope will release him from his vows before many months have passed. I have promised then to go over and fetch him."

"What sort of a fellow is he?" Lord Henry enquired.

"The image of his father in appearance," Sir Stephen confided. "I recognized him directly I saw him on the ramparts at Pellini, the night we were there, but I hadn't, of course, the faintest idea that there had ever been any marriage. I talked to him as his late father's friend. I must admit that I came away feeling that he was better in the monastery than out of it."

"What about his disposition — towards us, I mean?"

"That will undergo a change, without a doubt, under these altered circumstances. I should imagine that his mother was an unhappy woman — very much neglected by your brother, who we know was not a particularly

— er — considerate person. The young man has been brought up in the belief — or, of course, he may have imbibed it himself — that both she and he were deeply wronged. He has a violent disposition — some of his mother's Italian blood in him, I should think, — and he seems to have nourished almost a hatred against his father and his father's family. That, however, will I am sure be modified if it does not altogether disappear under existing circumstances."

"A pleasant lookout for us," Lord Henry observed gloomily.

"You may rely upon it," Sir Stephen promised, "that every scrap of influence I possess will be used to make this young man take a sane view of the situation."

"And supposing he doesn't, how do we stand?"

Sir Stephen frowned.

"You wish me to be quite frank?"

"Absolutely."

"You would be penniless. You will remember that your late brother made you an allowance of some four thousand a year. That, however, was purely voluntary. The Chatfield estates have neither jointures nor settlements. Everything has always been voluntary. Shall I go on?"

"If there is anything worse to be said, pray don't omit it," Lord Henry enjoined bitterly.

"I am speaking now from an entirely legal point of view," Sir Stephen continued. "The income from the estates which you have drawn and spent constitutes a debt to the new owner. Furthermore, you have realised on certain outlying portions of the property and spent the money. This also is a debt. I need hardly say," he went on, "that I shall urge upon this young man

as strongly as possible that it is his duty to make you an adequate allowance and that any restitution of what has been spent under a misapprehension is quite impossible."

"In plain words, we are paupers!"

"I am afraid that is the long and short of it," the lawyer agreed. "It is a terribly unfortunate situation. I need scarcely say that you have my most profound sympathy, both you and your family. It is particularly hard, too, upon the younger people."

"What are we to do until this young man arrives?" Lord Henry demanded.

"Go on just as you are," the lawyer advised. "I was coming to that directly. Nothing is to be disturbed until he arrives."

"I hope to God he won't hurry, then!" Lord Henry exclaimed fervently.

Sir Stephen took his leave, after a few more words of sympathy. His distinguished client sat for several minutes in his chair without moving. His thoughts were chaotic. He was utterly unable to realise this thing which had happened. Presently he rose to his feet and made his way out into the hall. Attentive servants ministered at once to his wants. A silk hat and a tall grey hat were presented for his choice; gloves and a stick were pressed into his hand. He passed down the broad steps, between the stately pillars of the great house, on to the pavement, and took his usual leisurely stroll into the Park. Here he selected a chair in a remote position and sat gazing at the crowd. There was something symbolic in the ostracism which he had voluntarily embraced. He was no longer one of them. He was an outsider, a looker-on at the pleasant little game of life at which for so many years

he had dealt the cards, cut and shuffled and dealt again. He saw his friends pass in the distance without greeting them, imagined their amazement when they heard the news, the thrill of interest, the careless word of sympathy, the swift forgetfulness. He was one of the first noblemen of his country. He had played his part conventionally, if without marked distinction. He had gambled a little, dissipated a little, dabbled in philanthropy, taken a grave but not overzealous interest in politics. He had few friends, scarcely a single enemy. He had liked to consider himself one of the old order, had presented a stiff front to the great stream of invaders, unless some personal and immediate good was to be had by extending the hand of patronage. He saw the truth very clearly that morning, and he knew quite well that it would be possible for him to slip out of his place without being missed for even twenty-four hours.

But Monica! That was where the rub came in. Selfish he might be to the core as regarded himself — even as regarded his wife and Eustace — but when it came to Monica he was a different man. It was not only his pride in her: there was something underneath that — something less personal — something of real affection. The first great pang which this strange news had brought him was when he had thought of his daughter, had seen her drop out of the life which seemed now to revolve around her, had imagined others taking her place, her admirers dissipated, her name left out of the papers, her pictures from the illustrated Press. What on earth was to become of a girl like Monica without money? He brooded so long about her that it was only towards the end of the morning that he began to think about himself. By

that time realisation was at work. He grew older as he sat upon his seat and looked beyond the Park into the future. After all, it had been a fine thing to be a Duke, to be master of those wonderful houses, to sit at the head of the table in the banqueting hall at Chatfield Castle, to receive the homage of his tenants and the smaller country gentry, to be allowed place in the hunting field, place in the House of Lords, place even in the anteroom of palaces. After fifteen years these things had become part of his existence. To live on, dethroned, stripped of his consequence, oppressed all the time by the burden of an inadequate income — why, the very idea was a nightmare! There were luxuries which had become second nature to him, obligations, the nonfulfilment of which would be a humiliation. He shivered as the thoughts formed themselves more coherently in his brain. It was a new form of misery, this — something unheard of in the experience of any man — to have walked for all these years amongst the elect and now to slip back into the lower places. At the best, what had he to hope for? A few thousands a year, a Kensington residence, three or four servants, perhaps a cheap butler, cold mutton for luncheon, the made-up dishes of a second-rate cook for dinner. He reminded himself of sundry half-hearted excursions into the works of various philosophers, and in a crude sort of way he took his life to pieces and looked at it. It was the same from every point of view. There had been no motive in it anywhere, except to follow the daily curriculum of pleasure. Books had never attracted him; of art or science he knew nothing. Racing, shooting, and hunting — yes, under the most luxurious conditions possible. A flutter at cards or roulette and, by all means, now and then,

an occasional Bohemian supper party — an expensive amusement and never to be talked about. Was there anything he could take with him — to Kensington? The question answered itself. At fifty-nine years of age, it was not possible to create a new world and fill it with new pleasures. — He abandoned his reflections at last and turned slowly homewards, feeling an older and a stricken man for that hour in the Park alone with his thoughts. It seemed to him that every one must notice the change. A Bishop whom he met at the gate gave him fresh food for reflection.

"I hope, my dear Duke," that dignitary said, "that we shall see you in the House of Lords this afternoon. Lord Mountavon's bill for the redistribution of stipends in various dioceses is one that deserves your most serious attention."

"I shall most certainly be there," Lord Henry promised gravely.

He passed on his way with a grim smile. What was the penalty, he wondered, for having voted something like a hundred and fifty times in the House of Lords, without being a member of that august body. A fine, probably. There were so many unrepealed statutes of former days that perhaps imprisonment might follow. He ran into a celebrated judge at Stanhope Gate and condescendingly stopped him.

"James," he asked, "do you know the penalty for voting in the House of Lords when you are not a member?"

"Something on the Tower Hill with a chopper, I should imagine," was the light-hearted reply.

Lord Henry went on his way, smiling. As he entered the house he saw some horses being led away and heard a male voice with Monica's in her own little sitting

room. He entered the library, closed the door and took down the telephone — an instrument which he cordially detested and seldom used. In due course he reached the ear of Sir Stephen Dobelle.

"Chatfield speaking, Sir Stephen."

"Quite so."

"Respecting the news which you sprung upon me this morning, I understood you to say that nothing need be changed for two or three months."

"For two months, at least, probably three, possibly four."

"No one else knows?"

"Not a soul."

"Then I propose," Lord Henry continued, "to leave my family in ignorance, for say six weeks."

There was a short hesitation.

"If you think it wise," was the doubtful assent.

"I can't see that it makes the least difference," Lord Henry declared. "They may just as well have another six weeks' happiness. You have no objection?"

"Certainly not."

Lord Henry hung up the telephone and went up to luncheon. His guests found him in a most genial and pleasant mood.

CHAPTER VI

The crowning event of a very brilliant season was, without a doubt, the dinner party followed by a dance given by the reputed Duchess of Chatfield one night about two months later. Royalty, both foreign and domestic, graced both functions. Never was there a more wonderful gathering of beautiful women and distinguished men. Chatfield House had always been a favourite resort of the diplomatic set, and every Embassy seemed to have sent its quota of brilliantly uniformed and picturesquely attired guests. Lord Henry, occupied for hours in purely formal duties, found time now and then to watch his amazing daughter and join in the general tribute of admiration which she excited. Comparative strangers, as well as her own intimates, were raving about her. Her dress of white satin, although it was the creation of a great artist, was simplicity itself. She wore no ornament save the single rope of pearls which was one of the heirlooms of the family. Her hair was arranged without any trace of the coiffeur's art. It was Monica herself who was so amazing. The slight listlessness of a few months ago seemed to have passed. She had a smile for every one, a sparkling word, a laugh, an irresistible glance for each of her friends. She danced tirelessly with whoever asked her, showing no favour even to the most august of her partners. She had her moments, perhaps, but they were frankly taken. Once she was away from the ballroom for nearly half an hour and when she returned, without the partner who had escorted her, there was a transitory seriousness in her

expression. It went, however, with her first dance. Even Eustace, who was not as a rule enthusiastic as to her charms, sought her out to offer his meed of appreciation.

"Monica, you look ripping to-night," he declared. "There's a great gamble going on as to how many offers of marriage you've had within the last three hours."

She laughed.

"I never advertise my scalps, Eustace," she confided.

"One poor chap I know of has got it in the neck," Eustace remarked. "I saw him making for home and Mother as I crossed the hall. By the bye, has Dad asked you to come into the library when it's all over?"

Monica nodded.

"It sounds portentous, doesn't it?"

"Sounds as though he wanted to get at us for something," Eustace agreed. "I expect we are squeezing him a bit between us."

Monica shrugged her shoulders. A touch of recklessness had momentarily hardened her face.

"If one lives, one must spend," she observed. "In any case, Eustace, I don't think it can be about money. This dinner and dance are more extravagant than anything we've done this season, and they're entirely his affair. My guess is that he's going to let Chatfield. I must go. There's a poor man waiting for me to dance with him."

Towards three o'clock, the host found the ceremonial side of his duties over. Various august personages had departed. He looked about for a companion with whom to invade the buffet and discovered Sir Stephen standing in a corner, looking on with folded arms.

"Watching me spend the other chap's money, eh?"

Lord Henry observed with good-humoured sarcasm. "Never mind! Come and have a glass of the other fellow's wine. It's good. I can promise you that."

Sir Stephen accepted the invitation, but his demeanour was still gloomy.

"I cannot pretend that I altogether approve of your entertainment, Lord Henry, wonderful though it has been," he declared.

"My dear chap, how illogical!" his host remonstrated. "Everything was to go on as before until your precious monk put in his appearance. Those were your own words. We always give one dinner and dance during the season. If I entertain at all, I must entertain as the Duke of Chatfield should. Now drink that Pommery. Nineteen hundred and four, every bottle of it. I thought you'd consider this rather a sporting wind-up."

"A lawyer has often to forget that he is a sportsman," Sir Stephen rejoined drily.

"Well, it isn't your show, anyway," Lord Henry reminded him. "When do you start for Italy?"

"To-morrow."

"You haven't heard from the young man?"

"Not a line. I had a message from the Father Superior to say that the dispensation had arrived and that I should be welcome at the monastery next week."

Lord Henry saw ghosts for a moment but he thrust them from him.

"I must go," he announced.

"I'm slipping away myself, in a moment," Sir Stephen confided. "I've had very little conversation with the young man as yet, as you know, but you may rely upon it — er — Lord Henry — that I shall do my best to make him see the situation reasonably. The

only fear I have is that he nourishes some secret grudge against the family which he may be disposed to visit upon you all."

"Hang it!" Lord Henry protested. "A chap who's lived in a monastery and who ought to be brimming over with religion, generosity, forgive-your-enemies, and that sort of thing. What's the good of burying yourself in one of those places if it doesn't make a holy man of you?"

"Quite so," the lawyer agreed. "All I can say is that I hope he's changed since he went in. We shall find you down at Chatfield, sha'n't we?"

"We're leaving for there next week," Lord Henry replied. "A pleasant journey to you."

It was four o'clock before the last guest had left. Lord Henry made his way into the library. Supper had been prepared on a round table there and a magnum of champagne reposed in an ice-pail. A couple of servants were waiting.

"Open the wine and you can go," Lord Henry directed.

They obeyed promptly. Presently Lady Susan came yawning in, followed by Eustace and Monica.

"My dear Henry!" his wife protested. "Do you see the hour? It's very nice and thoughtful of you and all that, but what can you have to say that won't keep till the morning?"

He smiled and held a chair for her. Then he filled the glasses with wine.

"Monica and Eustace," he said, "I hope you've enjoyed the evening."

"It has been wonderful, Dad," the former assured him. "I've enjoyed my own party better than any I've been to this year."

"Ripping good show!" Eustace declared enthusiastically.

"Still no news for us, Monica?" her father enquired.

"Still no news, Dad," she answered. "It was touch and go to-night, but I wasn't quite desperate enough, thank heaven."

They were seated in easy-chairs around the table. Lord Henry played with the stem of his wineglass.

"I have some news for you," he announced.

"News?" Lady Susan repeated.

"Good or bad?" Monica asked quickly.

"Bad," he answered.

Eustace refilled his glass. They all three looked at their host.

"Some money bother," Lady Susan concluded with a yawn.

"He's going to let Chatfield," Monica thought.

"He wants me to help him cut an entail," Eustace decided. "Hope I get something out of it."

"My news is very bad indeed," Lord Henry pronounced. "We have been living for the last fifteen years in a fool's paradise, in another man's houses, spending another man's money. It appears that my brother Francis — your uncle, Monica — was married in Italy to the young woman with whom we knew that he had formed some connection. A son was born, whom, by a strange coincidence, Dobelle encountered on the night of his novitiate at Pellini. That son is the Duke of Chatfield. Dobelle leaves for Italy to-morrow to bring him home."

The glass slipped from Eustace's fingers and went crashing on to the floor. Monica said not a word. Her hands were clasped in front of her; her eyes were gazing fixedly through the wall of the room. Lady

Susan was no longer an ordinary-looking woman, inclined to corpulency. She rose from her place, came over to her husband, and laid her hand affectionately upon his shoulder.

"My dear Henry," she said. "This is bad for all of us, but it is cruel for you. I am very, very sorry."

"I have seen him too," Monica murmured.

CHAPTER VII

The momentous day had arrived. Lord Henry was standing upon the hearthrug in the library at Chatfield Castle. Eustace was staring moodily out of the great curved window across the park. Lady Susan, very comfortable in her easy-chair, was busy knitting.

"I wish you wouldn't be so damned industrious, Susan," her husband complained irritably. "It gets on my nerves to see you working away there as though nothing had happened or was likely to happen."

She smiled.

"Better accustom yourself to it, Henry. I may be doing it for a living next week."

"Rubbish!" he scoffed.

"The fellow can't be such a cur as to leave us alone altogether," Eustace declared, turning away from the window. "He is certain to make us suitable allowances."

Lord Henry grunted.

"Suitable allowances!" he repeated. "What can the son of an Italian farmer's daughter, who has spent the last three years in a monastery, know of suitable allowances to people in our position?"

"He is also the son of your brother Francis," Lady Susan reminded him.

"Francis was a crazy nincompoop or we shouldn't have been in this mess," her husband grumbled.

"I can't think what the fellow's got his knife into us all for," Eustace observed.

"Are you sure that he has, my dear?" his mother asked.

"Well, if not, what does old Dobelle mean by saying in his letter to Dad this morning that we must be prepared to find him somewhat bitter?"

"We couldn't help Francis keeping his marriage a secret," Lord Henry pointed out peevishly.

"No one seems to have even known that there was a son," Eustace remarked.

"And no one would have known," his father sighed, "if we hadn't taken old Dobelle with us on that accursed motor tour through Italy."

"Even then, if he hadn't gone ferreting around, nothing need have happened," Eustace groaned. "This fellow would have stayed in the monastery all his life and no one would ever have heard of him."

"Sir Stephen did what I suppose he thought was his duty," Lady Susan observed, knitting steadily.

"Duty!" her son exclaimed. "Meddlesome old ass! What about his duty to us? He's our family lawyer, isn't he? Look at the plight he's brought us to! And then he writes that we must be prepared to find him somewhat bitter! Seems to me we're the people who ought to feel bitter."

"It's easy to be conscientious when it's the other chap who suffers," Lord Henry declared. "All the same, I don't think we ought to blame Dobelle."

"I suppose not," Eustace assented. "In any case we shall have to keep friends with him. He'll have more influence with this interloper than any one, I should think."

"After all, you know, he isn't an interloper," Lady Susan remarked, holding up her work to the light. "We're the interlopers."

"My dear Susan!" her husband protested.

"Haven't we been living in his houses and spending his income for the last fifteen years?"

"His income!" Lord Henry repeated.

"His houses!" Eustace muttered.

"God bless my soul, Susan!" the former expostulated irritably. "I never heard such nonsense in my life."

"Well, it's the truth," she rejoined equably. "And I should say that if you wanted to drive me to my little shop in Bond Street, you'll continue to ignore it as you are doing now. Do you suppose this young man won't resent all these years he's spent as a pauper, when he might have been Duke of Chatfield with eighty thousand a year?"

"To hear you talk, Mother," Eustace grumbled, "one would imagine that you sympathised with him."

"So I do, up to a certain point," Lady Susan agreed. "Anyhow, he's Francis's son, properly married and vouched for."

"And Duke of Chatfield, damn him!" Eustace exclaimed. "He'll probably turn this place into a monastery, wear parson's kit and make a laughingstock of us all."

The door was opened. They all looked quickly up. Monica entered, in her country riding habit, still a little breathless.

"Any news of his Grace?" she demanded.

"Should be here any moment now," Eustace replied, turning back to the window. "If you gallop that bay so hard, you'll come a 'purler' some day, Monica. This side of the park is full of rabbit holes. — No sign of him yet."

"They were stopping the express at the junction," Lord Henry announced, glancing at his watch. "If

the train's punctual he should be here in ten minutes."

Monica threw her whip on to the couch, established herself in an easy-chair and lit a cigarette.

"Genial reception he'll have, from the look of you all!" she observed.

"I trust we shall receive him with dignity," her father rejoined coldly. "On the other hand, any affectation of pleasure would be ridiculous."

Eustace suddenly became very much in earnest.

"I call Monica's attitude in this matter simply callous," he declared. "You don't seem to realise what it means, Cis. Do you know that we haven't a house between us?"

"Not a roof to sleep under," Lord Henry pointed out impressively.

"And every shilling the estate produces is in entail," Eustace continued. "There are a few silly titles, but not a bob for any other member of the family except the titular head."

"Not only that," Lord Henry went on, "but strictly speaking we owe this fellow about a million for money spent during the last fifteen years."

Monica knocked the ash from her cigarette.

"It does seem rather a mess," she acknowledged. "I think I shall have to put things straight for you by marrying him."

There was a moment's rather curious silence. Her mother, for the first time, ceased to knit. Her father seemed engrossed in agreeable contemplation. Eustace scratched his chin and looked at his sister thoughtfully.

"No harm in being civil to the fellow anyhow, Monica," he suggested. "You're a damned good-looking girl. He might do a lot worse."

"What a courtier this brother of mine is becoming," Monica observed ironically.

"There is a little romance in the background already, isn't there?" her father enquired.

"Rather!" Monica assented. "He drove off a couple of fierce-looking thieves who tried to rob me on the ramparts of Pellini."

"The night I deserted," Eustace remarked.

Monica nodded.

"I am afraid, though," she confessed, "that he didn't show the least desire to improve upon the occasion. I got quite worked up trying to make a natural human being of him. He certainly looked at me once with an odd sort of glitter in his eyes," she went on ruminatively. "I sang him a little song about roses and passion in the midst of his prayers."

"I expect," Lady Susan sighed, still knitting very fast, "that we shall find him a confirmed celibate."

"That's right, Mummie. Keep cheerful!" Monica enjoined. "Don't mind my shattered hopes!"

"Well, here's the car, anyhow," Eustace announced, turning away from the window. "We shall soon know what's in store for us. Buck up, everybody!"

Monica rose to her feet and strolled across the room to an old-fashioned mirror.

"The question is," she propounded, gazing at her reflection steadfastly, "whether, in the interests of the family, do I look my best in a habit, or do you think that I should make a greater impression in one of those fluffy negligée things with plenty of silk stockings showing. I've got one of the most improper creations you ever saw upstairs — all creation and no material."

"I'm for the habit," Eustace declared. "You can treat him to the other sort of thing at dinner time.

You look ripping as you are and besides, you haven't time to change. We need your moral support."

"It is perhaps as well," Lord Henry said solemnly, "that every member of the family should be present when this young man arrives."

They heard the car stop and the sound of footsteps in the hall. It was a moment full of peculiar significance to every one of them.

"Perfectly damnable situation this!" Eustace exclaimed, walking restlessly back and forth.

"Hideous!" his father agreed.

"It will be all over in a few minutes," Lady Susan reminded them soothingly.

"So like a dentist's antechamber," Monica murmured, retreating a little into the shadows.

In due course the door was opened, and Johnson, the sixty-four-year-old butler, made his dread announcement with all the solemnity the occasion warranted.

"Sir Stephen Dobelle — The Duke of Chatfield, your lordship."

"Damn the fellow!" the ex-Duke muttered.

"Filthy taste!" Eustace echoed.

They all stood with their eyes fixed upon the door. Sir Stephen came bustling in, his deportment more volatile even than usual. Behind him came a tall, white-faced young man, with high forehead, deep-set eyes, and fine, firmly set mouth. He was ill-dressed in a dark suit of foreign cut. He showed no signs of nervousness, interest, or courtesy.

"Here we are, you see," Sir Stephen exclaimed. "A few minutes late. Nothing to speak of. My fault entirely, the announcement," he added, looking behind to be sure that Johnson had left the room. "Thought it best to get it over and done with. Chatfield, this is

your uncle, Lord Henry Wobury, and your aunt, Lady Susan, and your cousins Monica and Eustace."

With the exception of Monica, they all advanced a step or two towards him. Francis, without change of countenance, bowed very slightly to each. He seemed not to notice the outstretched hands.

"We cannot pretend — er" — Lord Henry began — "er — that we are unfeignedly glad to see you, Francis, but at the same time as a relative and the eldest member of our House, I see no reason why we should not shake hands."

The newcomer made no movement in response. There was an amazing aloofness about his bearing and his expression.

"You will forgive me, all of you," he begged calmly. "My life for the last few years has been one of complete isolation. In the monastery we did not shake hands. I have not yet acquired the habit."

Monica came deliberately from the more secluded portion of the room. She held out her hand tentatively. Her lips parted in a faint smile. Her eyes looked into his.

"You won't refuse me, will you, Cousin Francis? We are old friends and I have seen you use your hands in my service."

He remained unmoved, frigid, almost discourteously unresponsive.

"You will forgive me for the present," he apologised stiffly. "Lay customs will no doubt come more easily to me in time."

Monica indulged in a little grimace but she did not flinch.

"If I had had my way," she reminded him, "you would have become accustomed to them by this time.

I did my best to keep you out of the monastery. You remember? "

Her voice had softened. To the others it seemed a magnificent piece of acting. Eustace, for instance, had never admired his sister more. There was not, however, even a flicker of change in the expression of the young man on whom she smiled.

"I remember now that you talked to me on the ramparts on my probationary night," he admitted. "As soon as I had passed through the gates it was my duty to forget — and I forgot."

"Even me?" Monica asked, with a ravishing note of appeal in her tone and a faint uplifting of the eyebrows.

"Even you," he answered deliberately.

Monica remained where she stood for a moment, without speech or movement. Francis had the air of one waiting patiently in case she might have more to say. With a little shrug of the shoulders she abandoned the duel and, turning away, sank into an easy-chair. She had the feeling that she had offered herself as champion for the family and been worsted.

"This dear cousin of ours has not come back to pay us compliments," she remarked, with some bitterness. "I think I liked you better, Francis, on the ramparts of Pellini."

Sir Stephen found it time to intervene.

"Every allowance should be made, my dear Lady Monica," he insisted, "by all of you, for any slight peculiarity of outlook on the part of your cousin. You must remember that for the last few years he has been an absolute recluse. I was amazed when on my last visit to the monastery the daily routine was explained to me."

Johnson made his noiseless reappearance, followed by a footman carrying a tea equipage. Even so obvious an interruption was a relief to every one.

"You suffered many privations, I fear," Lord Henry remarked courteously.

"Beastly grind that getting up at daybreak must have been," Eustace sympathised.

"I can't think who did your mending," his mother reflected.

"And washing," Monica added softly.

"The life, I am sure, would not have appealed to any of you," Francis admitted in a tone which sounded almost harsh. "It was one, however, which I deliberately chose, and which I was for many reasons loath to abandon."

Sir Stephen nodded.

"Extraordinary how hard I found it to persuade him," he confided.

There was a brief pause. The tea was set out. Johnson and his satellite left the room.

"Won't you come and sit by me, Francis?" Lady Susan invited, making room by her side.

He accepted the vacant seat with a slight bow.

"I'm very proud of my tea," Lady Susan babbled on. "Orange Pekoe, selected leaves. I carry a small chest of it with me whenever I go on the continent nowadays. I remember quite well that at Pellini it was very much worse than at any other place. Terribly wishy-washy stuff I expect they gave you at the monastery."

"We learnt there, I think, to forget our palates," he replied. "Whilst we are upon the subject, may I make a general request," he added, after a moment's pause. "You none of you, not even Sir Stephen, un-

derstand the conditions of life imposed upon and enjoyed by us in the place from which I have come. May I beg that in our future conversations it be not alluded to."

"A very reasonable request," Lord Henry acquiesced. "It shall be as you wish."

"Just as you like, of course, Francis," his aunt agreed. "But I am sure that it was wishy-washy."

"What a martinet you are," Monica sighed. "I was looking forward to hearing all sorts of thrilling details."

"I can assure you that you would have been disappointed," Francis replied. "My life at St. Joseph's was very simple and very rigorous. There could be nothing about its routine of interest to the general public."

"So that's that," Monica whispered, with a little yawn, to her brother who was leaning over her chair.

"Swallowed a ramrod," he murmured. "Let me take your cup."

Lord Henry still pursued the path of duty. Francis had evidently no intention of originating any conversation.

"It is early days, I suppose, Francis, to ask you what you think of England?"

"I am going to live in it," was the quiet rejoinder.

"You found London, no doubt, rather — er — depressing?"

"Dead out of season, you must remember," Eustace put in. "Nothing doing after Goodwood. Flat as ditch water!"

"I saw very little of London," Francis said patiently. "We arrived there late last night and it rained this morning."

"But this place?" Monica asked. "Surely you must love this place?"

"It seems very beautiful," he admitted.

"The parts which you have not seen are more beautiful still," she told him. "I love the park, of course, and the trees are wonderful, but people come from all over England to see the castle. The keep is quite historical, and then there is the banqueting hall, the terraces on the south side and the sunken gardens. Really, I almost wish I were you, Francis," she went on reflectively. "You are going to see all these things for the first time and know that they belong to you. You couldn't appear a little more interested, could you?"

Again her eyes challenged his smile. He looked across at her gravely.

"If my attitude seems disappointing," he said, "I can only ask you to remember that I come from a life where emotion of any sort was a rare visitant."

"Just so, just so!" Sir Stephen intervened. "You'll get over that. You'll relax a lot presently."

"Rather!" Eustace exclaimed. "By Jove, I'd give something to be you, Cousin Francis! It's a pretty good world, you know, for a young fellow of your age with eighty thousand a year. What a lot you have to look forward to."

"I may find the collection of new interests a matter of some difficulty," Francis remarked.

"Not you," his uncle declared cheerfully. "That'll come all right. My dear," he added, turning to his wife, "if we have all finished, the servants might remove your tea equipage. I shall venture to ring the bell. It will be a great relief to us all to have our — er — business conversation with — er — Francis."

Lady Susan laid down her knitting and rose to her feet.

"While they are taking these things away, Francis," she said, "I must show you the view from the window here. We are very proud of the park — or rather we have been. There are no finer oaks in the kingdom than the Chatfield oaks."

She walked to the window, and for the first time Francis unbent a little as he leaned to her side. Lord Henry buttonholed the lawyer.

"Seems a trifle unapproachable, eh?" he remarked nervously.

"Inscrutable," Sir Stephen confessed.

"Have you been able to form any idea at all as to his intentions?"

"None whatever. He has all the figures. I saw him studying them on the way down. He is a very difficult person to get to talk when he doesn't want to."

"I am afraid we are going to find him a very difficult person, anyhow," Lord Henry sighed.

The servants had left the room. Lord Henry cleared his throat. His wife, who recognised the signal, turned away from the window. Francis followed her lead. The long-expected moment had arrived.

CHAPTER VIII

"I THINK, Francis," Lord Henry began, "that the time has arrived for a few words of explanation as to the future."

"Our future," Eustace interpolated.

"Our mundane future," Monica murmured.

"We find ourselves," their father continued, with a glance of disapproval at the interrupters, "in what I may term a unique position. A few months ago I, as the head of the house, was in receipt of an income of something like eighty thousand pounds a year. I have allowed Eustace five thousand pounds a year, my wife and daughter two thousand a year each, and the remainder of the income was absorbed in keeping up with due dignity this estate — the home of our family, Francis, for nearly seven hundred years — Chatfield House in London and Chatfield Lodge in Inverness. You are not in a position, of course, Francis, to realise what money means or what can be done with it, but I can assure you that the whole income from the estates has been spent by me in the manner indicated since my accession to the title. I am not saying a word against your father or your father's memory. He was considerate to us during his lifetime, for, as you may be aware, he made us a very reasonable allowance. That he should have placed us in this abominable dilemma, however, is, to say the least of it, inconsiderate. We are in the position, I gather, of having spent about a million of your money and of find-

ing ourselves suddenly without a roof to our heads or a penny to bless ourselves with."

"Not to speak of a few debts," Eustace groaned.

Monica, from the depths of her easy-chair, intervened unexpectedly.

"There is just one other point of view, isn't there, Father? We have been having a jolly good time for four years with Francis's money, whilst he probably hasn't had a penny to bless himself with."

"That wasn't our fault," Eustace declared.

"It certainly wasn't his," Monica rejoined drily.

There was a moment's pause. The attention of every one present was focussed upon Francis. He stood with his back to the window, listening to them each in turn, his face the face of a sphinx. His continued silence began to create a feeling of uneasiness amongst the little circle. Sir Stephen judged that the time had come for him to speak.

"If I may be allowed to intervene for a moment," he begged, clearing his throat vigorously, "I must confess that I have found his Grace somewhat uncommunicative as to his intentions, but I have taken the liberty of pointing out that the present situation is a little hard upon the — er — members of the family now present."

"Damned hard!" Eustace exclaimed.

"Most unprecedented!" Lord Henry ventured. "A situation, I may say, without any precedent whatsoever."

"I have taken the liberty of suggesting," Sir Stephen continued, "that a lenient view might be taken of the liability which you have unconsciously incurred, and that some sort of an allowance, such as was made by the late Duke, might be — er — revived under present

conditions. The allowance made by your late father," he went on, turning to Francis, "was four thousand a year and the free use of the Dower House — the residence which we passed upon entering the park. There were also certain privileges regarding domestic service, gardeners, etc., which I need not enumerate."

"We had the use of the dairy farm," Lady Susan said, looking up from her knitting.

"And all the outlying shooting," Eustace put in.

"Saddle horses, too, were at our disposal," Lord Henry remarked.

Again they all looked anxiously at the silent figure in their midst. This prolonged silence was beginning to get on their nerves. Lord Henry made a direct appeal to him.

"You will understand, I am sure, my dear Francis," he pointed out, "that our anxiety is great. It would perhaps be in order if you would acquaint us with your views."

For the first time since the conference had commenced, the young man spoke, and the sound of his voice, hard and unsympathetic though it was, came as a relief to them all.

"If you will excuse me for five minutes," he said, "I will discuss the matter with Sir Stephen, who shall acquaint you with my proposition. Sir Stephen, will you kindly accompany me out on the terrace?"

Lord Henry was much disturbed at the suggestion.

"My dear fellow!" he protested. "This is your own room, your own house. Let us all leave you for a short time. Let us leave you here with Sir Stephen. You can send for us when you are prepared to make — er — any statement. Susan, my dear — Monica — Eustace."

"Stop, please," Francis interrupted, with a quick gesture. "I shall be glad of the air. Sir Stephen and I will walk upon the terrace. I see that these windows open."

"Just as you please, of course," his uncle conceded. "You must notice the view, Francis, while you are there. A very wonderful view, every one considers it. We shall await your return here."

The two men stepped out on to the terrace. Lord Henry closed the window after them. The family exchanged rather doubtful glances.

"I wonder what he means to do for the mendicants?" Monica observed.

"Can't say," Eustace rejoined gloomily. "I don't like the look of the fellow at all."

"I wouldn't say that, Eustace," his mother remonstrated, looking at him over her spectacles, and letting her knitting for a moment subside into her lap. "You must bear in mind that his life for the last few years must have been a frightful thing. Those poor monks never get enough to eat, and their amusements are naturally limited. I don't suppose they're even allowed out to go to a picture palace."

"I remember that place we went over near Florence," Eustace reflected. "An old chap with a red beard read to them out of a prayer book while they ate their skilly, and afterwards they went to bed singing a hymn. Gad, if I were this fellow, I'd set things humming a bit!"

"Yes, but he's not like you," Monica remarked drily. "He's bred in holiness and learned in self-restraint. From what I've seen of him, I should think that self-restraint is his strong point."

"What I'm afraid of," her father declared, "is that

he may want to use all the income founding some sort of a religious institution over here."

"At the worst," Lady Susan sighed, "I can always take that little shop in Bond Street."

"I suppose I could always get a job driving motor cars," Eustace suggested doubtfully. "Worst of it is, these Johnnies all want a premium nowadays before they'll even take you into their showrooms."

"I must be good for something," Monica ruminated. "I don't know what. Wear dresses for Adèle, perhaps. Or ride hunters for Haslock and get commission on the sales."

"I suppose, if it comes to that," Lord Henry acknowledged drearily, "I could sell wines on commission. For my friends' sakes, I hope it won't! — Hullo! This looks bad. Dobelle coming back alone!"

"Francis isn't going to face us," Eustace muttered.

Sir Stephen stepped through the high glass window and fastened it carefully behind him.

"Where is our young relative?" Lord Henry asked anxiously.

"He has gone to his room for a time," the lawyer announced. "Let me put you all out of your anxiety. His suggestions for your welfare are marvellously generous — marvellously! I congratulate you all."

"Generous! Good!" Lord Henry exclaimed in a tone of immense relief.

"Fine fellow! Get on with it," Eustace begged.

"Generous!" Monica murmured doubtfully.

"The young man appears to take the broadest possible view of the situation," Sir Stephen confided. "He has, I must confess, completely surprised me. I fancied him entirely indifferent to any claims that society might have upon the House of Chatfield. I was altogether

mistaken. He realises that for some time at any rate he himself will be unable to do anything to uphold the prestige of the family. He leaves that matter therefore in your hands. And he leaves you — well — very generous means with which to accomplish that end."

"Generous! To what extent?" Lord Henry asked eagerly.

"He proposes to allow you twenty thousand a year, in order that you may be able to keep up an establishment in town, with the free use of the Dower House here."

"The man's a prince," Lord Henry declared with enthusiasm.

"Gad, he's a ripper," Eustace cried.

"After all, I shall not need to open my little shop," Lady Susan sighed.

"I don't understand it," Monica said simply.

"Why not?" her brother demanded.

"Because I'm perfectly certain that he hates every one of us."

"What an absurdity, Monica!" her father exclaimed severely.

"Silly rot! Why should he?" Eustace scoffed.

"Let us go and find him at once," Lord Henry suggested. "We should be prompt in expressing our gratitude."

Sir Stephen held out an admonishing hand.

"Stop!" he insisted. "There are two quite unimportant conditions attached to his generosity, although I must admit that they are strange ones. The first is that you all leave the Castle to-night."

"To-night?" Lord Henry repeated incredulously.

"Why, we couldn't get packed," Lady Susan protested.

"I sha'n't be able to wear my frills," Monica complained.

"I beg of you to take this young man's whim seriously," Sir Stephen said. "He wishes to spend his first night here alone. There is no hardship whatever involved in the matter. The Dower House is probably prepared to receive you, according to my advice, or there are sufficient automobiles in the garage to take you up to town, if you prefer it."

"I'm not sure that it isn't a jolly good idea," Eustace declared. "We should all have felt rather poops with him sitting at the head of the table."

"I might get up in time for Betty's dance to-night," Monica ruminated.

"The young man must no doubt feel somewhat of an interloper," her father reflected. "His condition indicates a certain amount of proper feeling on his part. In any case we must see him for a moment or two and express our thanks."

"Stop!" Sir Stephen enjoined. "That is the second condition. He insists upon it that you refrain absolutely from any expression of gratitude."

"Hateful young man!" Monica exclaimed. "He's too proud to be thanked, I suppose."

"If I were you," the lawyer advised, "I would accept his conditions blindly for the moment. I must confess that I myself cannot follow the workings of his mind, but we must all remember that we have to do with a very exceptional personage who has lived a very exceptional life. I haven't the least doubt that as time progresses you will find him a very desirable and friendly head of the house."

"I entirely agree with Sir Stephen," Lord Henry pronounced. "My dear Susan, Monica and Eustace,"

he went on, bowing to them each in turn, "I think that if we cannot express our gratitude to Francis, we can at least congratulate ourselves. The Dower House is a very comfortable little place — very comfortable, indeed — and the use of that with twenty thousand a year is a very princely arrangement. We must set about looking for a house in town at once."

"I suppose we ought to feel grateful," Monica acknowledged. "I don't a bit."

"And why not?" her father enquired.

"For one thing, I don't like to be made to feel like a pauper," she replied.

"Well, I'd a jolly sight rather be made to feel like one than be one," her brother declared fervently.

Sir Stephen glanced at his watch.

"Might I suggest," he ventured, "that you show some anxiety to fall in with our young host's whims? He will expect on his return to find you at least preparing to depart."

"Quite right, quite right!" Lord Henry approved. "Now, who's for London and who's for the Dower House? The least we can do is to study this young man's wishes."

"I'm not sure that I'm so keen about that dance," Monica pondered. "It would be rather a scramble to get up to-night, anyhow."

"What are you doing, Dobelle?" Lord Henry enquired.

"I think I'd better stay here," was the somewhat gloomy reply. "The young man wasn't in the least pressing about it but there is a great deal to be arranged."

"Then I propose that we others all remain at the Dower House for to-night," Lord Henry suggested.

"We can talk over our new prospects, and if Dobelle has anything more to say to us he can look in before he leaves to-morrow."

"I'm agreeable," Eustace assented. "I'd rather like to go over the old place."

Sir Stephen held open the door. They all passed out. On the further side of the great hall, Francis was standing, gazing up at one of the pictures. At the sound of their approach he turned away and, without looking round, disappeared into one of the distant rooms.

"Quaint," Monica murmured, "but after all he made the rules."

"And we're going to keep them," her father declared. "We'll be out of the house in a quarter of an hour, Dobelle."

"Let us all carry our own bags and walk across the park," Monica suggested, with fine sarcasm. "What a film picture! 'Dispossessed!' The gloomy young Duke might be standing upon the terrace, watching us."

"I shall certainly not walk," Lady Susan protested. "The grass will be much too wet after that last shower."

Monica made a little grimace.

"We might draw you in a Bath chair to supply the last note of pathos."

"I'm much too fat for a Bath chair," her mother objected.

They had reached the first turn of the staircase. Monica turned round and waved her hand to Sir Stephen.

"We're talking nonsense to hide our real feelings," she explained. "Eustace has gone to order a car and

a cart for the luggage. It will make a more modern picture after all. — Sir Stephen!"

"Lady Monica."

She was leaning over the heavy oak banisters, looking downward.

"Have you any influence with the film companies? Because if the twenty thousand a year doesn't pan out, I've decided upon my future vocation."

"Financially," the lawyer began, with a warning gesture —

"And I hope you'll enjoy your tête-à-tête dinner with our benefactor," she concluded.

She was suddenly conscious of the dark figure standing on the other side of the hall. Their eyes met for a moment. She kissed her hand lightly.

"Sorry, Cousin Francis!" she called out. "We shall all be gone in ten minutes."

CHAPTER IX

At eight o'clock precisely Francis, Duke of Chatfield, left his room and, descending the broad staircase which led into the hall, found Johnson awaiting him there and Sir Stephen a little in the background.

"Dinner is served, your Grace, in the banqueting hall," the former announced, "if you will be so kind as to follow me."

"We become sometimes the slaves of our dependents," Sir Stephen murmured, as he walked by his host's side. "Johnson is more than an ordinary servant here. He is the Master of Ceremonies. He has his own idea of what is right and wrong. I suggested dinner in the smaller dining room to-night but he would have none of it. I think that his idea is to impress you."

If indeed that was Johnson's idea he was doomed to disappointment. Francis took his seat in the great high-backed oak chair at the head of the table which might easily have seated sixty people, without any sign of superabundant interest. He glanced around at the huge room and up at the vaulted ceiling almost indifferently. There was nothing in his manner to indicate his realisation of the fact that he was in one of the most magnificent dining rooms in England.

"I have ventured to order the usual wines to be served," Sir Stephen announced a little dubiously. "You will find your cellars remarkably well stocked."

Francis, to his companion's great relief, sipped his sherry and expressed his grave approval of the wine.

"We made our own at Pellini," he observed, "but

I do not think that we were very successful. The grapes in that district are rather hard."

"Chatfield has always been famous for its wines," Sir Stephen confided. "Johnson is giving us some port afterwards which I think you will approve. I'm delighted to find that amongst the somewhat strict tenets of your late order abstention from wine is not practised."

"In Italy, I believe," Francis replied, "everybody drinks wine, just as they eat fruit and smoke tobacco. These things are all good and are all allowed."

An admirable dinner was served and partaken of almost in silence by the two men. Johnson, in supreme charge, remained all the time behind Francis's chair. There were other servants flitting about. Conversation of an intimate nature was impossible and minor subjects of discussion were hard to find. With the placing of great bowls of fruit upon the table, and the decanters of port and madeira, conditions, however, were altered. Even Johnson slipped away into the shadows. The two men were practically alone. It was Sir Stephen who directed the conversation into more intimate channels.

"I'm not at all sure, Duke," he remarked, "that you did not do a very wise thing when you insisted upon this measure of solitude for your first evening here. I hope you will believe that as an old friend and adviser of the family I consider it a great privilege to be your companion on this occasion."

"You are very good," was the murmured reply.

"It is a romantic, almost an overpowering situation," the lawyer continued. "Here you are, twenty-five or twenty-six years old but as new to the world as any lad from Eton. You are practically starting life to-

night — starting it too, as the head of one of our most ancient families with an immense income and a great name. Wonderful!"

"Starting it a little late," Francis suggested.

"At your age you have missed nothing," his companion declared. "You have the world at your feet."

"Have you any suggestions to make with regard to my immediate future?" the young man enquired.

"Indeed I have. That is why I am here."

"Proceed then, if you please."

Sir Stephen helped himself to wine and adopted an attitude of greater ease, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs.

"In the first place, you must take your seat in the House of Lords. Lord Grantley, Lady Susan's brother, will be proud to be your sponsor. Then I should advise your throwing open this place and entertaining. I gather that you are already a horseman. You must take lessons in golf and tennis and we must get old Amos, the head keeper here, to put you in the way of handling a gun. The Chatfield shooting is quite exceptional — you'll get a day from Royalty for certain. You must learn to drive a car too, of course, and we must find you a tailor. The suit of dinner clothes which I took the liberty of having put in your room, and which I am glad to see that you are wearing, I obtained by merely guessing at your measurements. They must be discarded as soon as you can be properly supplied."

"Anything else?"

The lawyer toyed with his wineglass.

"You must make up your mind on which side your political sympathies lie," he went on. "The Chatfields have always been Tories but there is no

reason why you shouldn't take a line of your own if it amuses you. In the House of Lords it won't make the slightest difference."

Francis sipped his wine, carefully and appreciatively. His cheeks were still as pale as ever but the light in his eyes seemed, if anything, more brilliant.

"You intend me, I perceive, to be a credit to the family," he remarked.

"I see no reason why you should not go far," Sir Stephen declared portentously. "Your early life and training have of course developed in you serious tastes, and you may, just at first, find the world rather an alarming place. That will, I am sure, wear off in time. Politics and philanthropy go well hand in hand and in these days of universal toleration your religion need be no drawback to your progress. There has seldom been a generation without a Chatfield in the Cabinet. Neither Lord Henry nor your cousin have shown the slightest inclination towards a career. I think I may say without offence, that they have not the brains. With you, it is different."

"Is this flattery?" Francis asked calmly.

"It is not intended as such," Sir Stephen assured him. "I simply want you to get a clear idea as to the possibilities of your future."

Francis looked down the great length of the room. They were sitting in a pool of subdued light. Beyond, there were oases of space. The confines of the great apartment were only to be imagined. Even the pictures upon the walls passed into indefiniteness.

"Sir Stephen," he said, "you are, I understand, the hereditary legal adviser of my family, and it is without a doubt owing to your efforts that my father's secret marriage in Rome was discovered and that I am

here. I owe it to you, therefore, that there should be no misunderstanding between us."

"I have the strongest possible desire," the lawyer declared, "to be not only your legal adviser but your friend and mentor in every other way, if you will allow me that privilege. There is nothing I should regret so much as the shadow of a misunderstanding between us."

"Very well, then," Francis rejoined. "Please listen to me now. I have not the faintest ambition to add in any way to the glories of my family. I have other plans."

"Plans?" Sir Stephen repeated dubiously. "You only landed in England yesterday. What plans can you have made?"

"They were alive in my brain," Francis assured him coolly, "when the gates of the monastery swung open and I came back into the world. Did you ever believe that I came joyfully, Sir Stephen?"

"You certainly didn't seem keen," the lawyer admitted. "Considering everything, you took a great deal of persuading."

"You never persuaded me. Nothing that you said even counted. I have come here and assumed my father's name for an altogether different reason. That reason does not necessarily make for the honour and glory of the House of Chatfield."

Sir Stephen was bewildered. He leaned back in his chair and gazed in amazement at the young man who sat, unmoved and sphinxlike, at the head of the long table.

"Are you by any chance a little overwrought?" he asked. "The journey — these new associations ——"

"I am quite myself," Francis assured him.

"It was only an hour or so ago," his guest observed, "that we were congratulating ourselves upon your broad-minded outlook. You have treated your relatives with the most amazing generosity. If you had chosen to consult me, I must confess that in your place I should have made some stipulation with regard to Lord Eustace. That young man ought to work. To make it possible for him to continue to lead an idle life is by no means an unmixed blessing."

"We will pass over my generosity to these members of my family," Francis said, with a faint but bitter smile. "It may be that I have a reason for it. As regards that touching little sketch of my probable career, however, you can dismiss it wholly from your mind. The present head of the House of Chatfield is going to make a figure neither in politics nor philanthropy. I do not propose to take my seat in the House of Lords. I do not intend to associate myself with any social or religious work. I am going to leave that side of life alone for the present."

"God bless my soul! What on earth are you going to do, then?" Sir Stephen demanded, his whole expression a study in amazement.

"They tell me that London is the gayest city in the world," Francis said coolly. "It is my desire to test the truth of that statement."

The lawyer sat for several moments absolutely speechless. When at last he did speak, his words sounded inadequate.

"I am very much surprised," he confessed.

"Why?"

"For no particular reason, except that I had formed an altogether different estimate of your tastes."

Francis shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"It is very easy to be mistaken," he said. "I read in the *Review* which you lent me upon the steamer that the easiest way to come into touch with modern life is through its follies. It is my intention to test the truth of that statement also."

"I am afraid that, under those circumstances," Sir Stephen declared stiffly, "I can be of very little use to you. Eustace would make a more suitable guide."

"The idea had already occurred to me," Francis admitted. "I sent word down to the Dower House some time ago that I should be glad to see my cousin after dinner if convenient."

Sir Stephen rose deliberately to his feet.

"I sincerely trust, Duke," he said, "that you are not in earnest."

"I am always in earnest," was the cold reply.

Sir Stephen was thoroughly upset. He rested his hand for a moment on the young man's shoulder. There was nothing left in him of the timeserver. He spoke honestly and naturally.

"Francis Chatfield," he began, "I am an elderly man, and you are a very young one. I have lived in the world and I know it. You have lived out of it and you know less of it probably than would be possible for any other man of your age. I am going to risk your anger by telling you that I don't like your outlook."

"I am sorry," Francis murmured.

"I don't like it," the lawyer continued, "and I tell you that it isn't natural. At heart you are a serious person. You have principles. The little puddle here which they call 'the gay life' has no real attraction for you. There is something behind this purpose of yours. What is it?"

The young man met the steadfast gaze of his would-be mentor without the slightest change of countenance. He showed no signs of anger, or even of impatience. There was, nevertheless, a dull finality about his words and manner.

"You mean well, Sir Stephen," he said, "and I recognise your right to offer me advice. As it happens, however, I do not require it. I intend to live my life according to my own ideas. I offer to no man my confidence."

"You won't even gratify my curiosity?" Sir Stephen persisted.

"No."

The great oak door in the distance had been opened, letting in a little flood of alien light. Johnson appeared, followed by Eustace.

"Lord Eustace Wobury is here, your Grace," the butler announced.

Francis rose to his feet and pointed to a place by his side.

"Set a chair for his Lordship and bring another wineglass," he directed. "It is very good of you, Eustace, to come across. — You really mean to leave us, Sir Stephen?" he asked, as the lawyer vacated his chair.

"If you will excuse me," the latter begged. "I have had a long day, and it seems to me that my presence is no longer needed."

CHAPTER X

Eustace took the lawyer's vacated seat a little diffidently. His whole attitude, in fact, was an interrogation mark. His cousin's message had come almost as a bombshell.

"Will you drink port or sherry?" the latter asked.

"The port is from the number twelve bin," Johnson ventured deferentially. "It was Sir Stephen's suggestion."

"Port by all means, then," Eustace declared. "These lawyers generally find their way to the best."

He sipped the wine appreciatively, noticing with some lightening of spirit that his cousin's glass had also been refilled. The latter waited until Johnson had left the room, and the door in the distance was closed.

"I asked you to look in this evening, Eustace," he began, "because, in the course of various conversations, it has become clear to me that Sir Stephen has a somewhat mistaken idea as to my plans for the future. He appears to have thought that my tastes would naturally run towards social and philanthropic works, with a dash perhaps of politics. Nothing of that sort interests me at all."

Eustace was puzzled but remained very much upon his guard.

"Dry old stick, Sir Stephen!" he commented. "He's always on to me to take up what he calls 'a career.' Dash it all, I had six years in the Household Brigade! Quite enough that, for any man!"

"My own tastes lie in other directions," Francis confided. "You could, I think, be useful to me."

Eustace set down the glass which he had been in the act of raising to his lips. He was somewhat mystified.

"Useful to you?" he repeated. "The spider that spun before the king, what? Jolly glad to do anything I can, of course."

He finished his wine. His host refilled his glass and added a little to his own.

"Glad to find you take a glass of wine, Cousin Francis," Eustace declared.

"We made our own at the monastery," Francis told him. "It was poor stuff, though, compared with this. — It is probable, Eustace," he added after a moment's pause, "that you also have formed a wrong opinion of me."

The young man moved uneasily in his chair.

"Oh, I don't know," he murmured. "Coming from a monastery and all that, you see — well, one scarcely knows where one is."

"You think that I am severe?"

"Well, those chaps we used to see about in the brown habits — chaps that came and grabbed you the morning that Monica was on the ramparts — seemed a bit on the gloomy side."

"That was your impression of them, was it?"

"Well, those I saw wandering about didn't look exactly riotous, you know," Eustace admitted; "didn't any of them look like hitting a bottle and making a night of it with the lads, what?"

"Their opportunities for such recreation were somewhat restricted," Francis observed.

"Er — just so," Eustace acquiesced, beginning to

regain some measure of confidence. "Good chappies in their way, no doubt! I dare say they had their beanos in the refectory when the Lord High Pooh-Bah was away."

"We were subjected to a discipline which allowed no latitude whatever," Francis explained. "For that reason I am altogether a stranger to the life at which you have hinted. I desire to remain a stranger no longer."

Eustace gazed at him blankly.

"What's that?" he gasped.

"I am proposing," his cousin said, in a matter-of-fact tone, "that you should show me something of the world in which you and other young men of our age live."

"Holy Moses! Are you in earnest?"

"Absolutely."

"May I have another glass of wine?" Eustace begged.

"You can finish the decanter, if you will," his cousin assured him. "You will excuse my falling a little behind. This wine is more powerful than any to which I have been accustomed."

Eustace fortified himself liberally and then continued.

"Now, they're always telling me at home," he confided, "that I'm a bit of an ass. I don't want to put my foot in it, so let's have the aces on the table, so to speak. You want to chuck the gloomy stuff and plunge into the giddy world, what?"

"Your phraseology is somewhat strange to me," Francis replied, "but I believe that you apprehend my meaning. We will begin at the beginning. I shall follow you to town to-morrow and I wish to be taken to

the various shopkeepers who will provide me with the clothes essential to my position."

"That goes with me, all right," Eustace declared enthusiastically. "I am at your service whenever you want me. I don't mind telling you that it will give me a leg up with some of my tradespeople who fancy that I don't plump down the ready quite fast enough. Good as another year's credit to me!"

"Then," Francis continued, "I should like to be introduced into the society in which you spend your lighter hours — the society of Bohemia, I suppose you would call it."

"You want to have a look at the fluff, what?" Eustace suggested.

There was a slight frown of mystification on the other's fine forehead.

"I beg your pardon?" he murmured.

"Fluff! Skirt! Little dollies from the musical comedy and what not!" Eustace explained.

"Just so," his cousin acquiesced, without changing a muscle.

"Easy as falling off a log," Eustace assured him. "I'd no idea, though — well, this will be one in the eye for Monica."

"For Monica?" Francis queried gently.

"She's sort of got you amongst the saints. Earnest works, and uplift, and fish for dinner on Fridays, you know."

"Your sister is naturally misled by the circumstances of our former meeting. — To continue, it is also my intention to start a racing stable. I should like an introduction to a very first-class trainer and the opportunity of purchasing some useful young horses for next season."

"The turf!" Eustace exclaimed in amazement. "You're not going on the turf!"

"That is my idea," Francis admitted. "Racing, I think, will be one of my chief amusements."

"Racing!" Eustace repeated, almost reverently. "It's in the blood. That's it! Greatest sport in the world, Cousin Francis! I can introduce you to the man who used to train for our grandfather — won the Derby twice and the Cambridgeshire three times. Holy Moses! Why, I offered to bet the governor a monkey, just now, that you'd be spending all the family shekels endowing a monastery before the year was out."

"You would have lost your bet," his cousin assured him. "The consecrated side of my life is for the present finished and, if you will permit me to say so, Eustace, the fewer references made to it, especially in that less conventional society to which you will probably introduce me, the better I shall be pleased."

"I see your point," Eustace assented readily. "Mum's the word. I'll pass it round amongst the lads and lassies. Meanwhile, the day after to-morrow in London, eh?" he added, as Francis rose to his feet.

The two young men walked down the room together — Francis nearly a head taller, straight and unbending, yet with a certain natural grace of movement: Eustace possessing a little too much flesh for his years, but also endowed with a certain amount of good looks. They parted in the hall, and Francis, after a moment's hesitation, entered the library. He walked to the fireplace and stood for several moments looking at the great picture which dominated the room. Then he rang the bell. Johnson himself answered it.

"Johnson," he said, "do you know if Sir Stephen has gone to bed?"

"Sir Stephen has retired, your Grace," the man announced.

Francis glanced up at the picture.

"Perhaps you can tell me, then," he went on. "Is this a portrait of my father?"

"It is considered a very fine likeness, your Grace."

"By whom was it painted?"

"By Herkomer, your Grace."

Francis nodded.

"I don't like it," he said. "Be so good, Johnson, as to bring two of the men here with a stepladder."

"I beg your Grace's pardon?" the man gasped.

"Two of the footmen," Francis repeated. "I wish the picture taken down."

"To-night, your Grace?"

"To-night. I am sorry, Johnson, that I do not seem to have the power to make myself readily understood."

"I beg your Grace's pardon," was the confused reply. "The matter shall be attended to."

He hurried from the room. Francis stood quite still, gazing at the portrait. It was indeed a very wonderful picture and a wonderful likeness. There was the same high forehead, the shapely head, the deep-set eyes, the firm straight mouth, with the little lines at the corners, which might mean cynicism or humour or tenderness. The picture of a fine-looking man, proud of himself and his great name.

Johnson reappeared and superintended the task. It took the united efforts of all three men to steady the picture on its removal. Francis himself had once to step to the rescue.

"What will your Grace have done with the canvas?" Johnson asked.

"There are some garrets in the house, I suppose, or a lumber room. Take it there."

"Very good, your Grace."

The men left the room with their burden. Francis leaned back against the table and looked up at the wall. His lips relaxed. The empty space pleased him.

CHAPTER XI

Francis, awake himself before dawn, returned from a long tramp across the park to find a car at the door and Sir Stephen on the point of departure.

"I am sorry to lose you so soon," Francis declared, with some note of courtesy in his tone. "I shall pay you a visit in London during the week."

"You will be very welcome," his departing guest assured him. "I am glad to have seen you for a moment this morning. On thinking things over, I came to the conclusion that I had been a little hasty last night. I had formed certain conclusions and it was rather a shock to realise that they were ill-founded."

"Pray do not allude to the matter again," Francis begged.

"I must say this," Sir Stephen insisted. "I am something of an old fogey, of course, but I know as well as any other man that the call of life to a person of your years has an appeal of its own. I have been accustomed to invest with too much importance the rigour of your early days. It is only natural that there should be a reaction, perhaps even a little bitterness. Remember that you are young, by all means. I am still convinced that you will also remember that you are the head of a great and honourable family."

Francis smiled enigmatically. He grasped the lawyer's hand, however, and wished him Godspeed. Then he allowed himself to be taken in to breakfast, served in a very pleasant apartment, with open French win-

dows looking out upon the terrace. Johnson produced an overfilled postbag a little apologetically.

"There are a great many letters here for your Grace," he announced. "If I might make the suggestion, Lord Henry used to have Mr. Moss, our librarian here, go through them first. Quite half or three quarters of his Grace's — I beg your pardon — his lordship's correspondence consisted of circulars or charitable appeals."

Francis waved the bag on one side.

"Take it to Mr. Moss," he instructed. "I will see him later in the day."

"Will there be any orders, your Grace, for the garage or the stables?"

Francis considered for a moment.

"There are saddle horses, I suppose?"

"Certainly, your Grace."

"Let me have one round at eleven o'clock," he ordered.

"Your Grace is without riding clothes," Johnson ventured to remind him.

"It is of no consequence," was the brief rejoinder. . . .

In some respects it was a strange morning — strange, not so much from its incidents as from the ebb and flow of the young Duke's mental attitude towards his surroundings. He wandered through the library proper — an immense apartment — was amazed at the number of books, and talked for a short time with the librarian. Then he strolled out of doors, passing in time from the more formal grounds to the old-fashioned walled gardens, high up behind the castle itself and gently sloped to catch the southern sun. The head gardener ventured to pay his respects, but Francis had

little to say to him. The beauty of the place and of the soft summer morning seemed to stir within him a very slight sense of pleasure. He was entirely without any instinct of ownership. He tried to realise that whether he desired it or not, this great castle, magnificent in its age and dignity, was his; that his, by inheritance, were the associations connected with it; that the land upon which he trod as far as he could see belonged to him, that these were his vassals who watched him furtively from their tasks, or who ventured sometimes to address him. This was the jewel of his inheritance, a home where kings had sheltered; a home in dignity and treasures second to none in the world. He stood looking down upon it all without a glow, without a single thrill. As often as his eyes sought to admire, the soft woodland scene faded away and the bare Italian hillside, the gloomy, white-plastered villa, with its ever-present atmosphere of sadness, took its place. The sense of loneliness which had seldom left him in life became even more poignant as he realised the beauty by which he was now surrounded. The old monastic argument seemed to come back to him with more force than ever— the argument drummed so often into his ears — "Beware of externals. In proportion as you grow to prize them so does the flower of the spiritual life languish." Externals were here in profusion, although his contemplation of them was almost listless. Yet the monastic doctrine missed the point. There was no spirituality along the path he designed to tread.

Nature had made him a fine horseman and notwithstanding the head groom's shock at his sombre and unsuitable costume, he watched his new master canter away with an expression of approval.

"The Chatfield seat!" he declared. "Except for his clothes he's as like the late Duke as a man could be — hands and all! We'll be taking the hounds again in less than a year," he confided to one of his underlings.

"For a parson," the latter admitted, "he does sit as he should, for sure."

"Parson!" his superior repeated. "Worse than that, so I've been told. A monk, James!"

"So long as it's no foreign religion he brings along ——"

Mr. Johnson suddenly swooping down upon them put an end to the conversation.

"It was Sir Stephen's wish," he announced, "that his Grace's brief residence in a monastery should be alluded to as little as possible."

"And I'm willing enough to fall in with it," the head groom agreed as he took his departure. "I don't hold with them monasteries nor monks either."

Francis rode aimlessly and without any sense of direction. The beauty of the country through which he passed made scant impression upon him. He rode along country lanes whose tall hedges were hung with wild roses and honeysuckle. Beyond were meadows starred with wild flowers — meadows with deep green herbage, yellow-spangled by the side of the river. The villages were clean and prosperous, with thatched roofs and gardens like nosegays. The smiling quiet of it all irritated him. He found himself continually comparing it with the stony hillside on which he had played as a boy — comparing the rosy-cheeked, healthy-looking country people, stolid and content, with the lean, brown-faced workers amongst whom he had grown up. A feeling of impatience with his too placid surroundings led him to take a byroad which seemed to lead into a

barer country. He came upon a heath — an unsuspected strip of moorland — with great fragments of lichen-covered rock, an occasional clump of gorse, and black patches of sun-dried bog land. Here he seemed to breathe a new atmosphere. A breeze, which he had scarcely felt before, blew in his face, fresh and vigorous. In the far distance was a thin streak of blue, which he realised must be the sea. He sat quite still on his horse, bare-headed, suddenly thrilled with the warmth of the sun and the stinging sweetness of the wind. He seemed to have escaped for a few minutes from the cloying atmosphere of an overprosperous neighbourhood. The solitude of the place, its emptiness from all signs of human habitation, soothed and invigorated him. He rode contentedly on — a black speck now in the untrammelled spaces. He felt a new sense of freedom, a sense of detachment from an entirely artificial world.

Monica laughed as she reined in her horse.

"Really," she said, "I begin to believe that you are at least an honest person. You really do dislike us. I never saw such a woebegone expression in my life."

"Your coming was so entirely unexpected," he explained stiffly.

"So was the vision of you," she laughed, "riding bare-headed and as black as a crow. You certainly do need Eustace to take you to a tailor's. Whatever were you saying to him last night? He came back in a perfectly beatific state. I don't see why the whole of your amiability should be lavished upon my unworthy brother!"

"What land is this we are upon?" he asked abruptly.

"'Whose,' I suppose you mean," she corrected.

"It's yours right enough. It's yours all the way down to the sea, where you have, what I believe they call, fore-shore rights."

He moved in his saddle a little impatiently

"The Chatfield domination ranges far," he remarked.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. They were walking their horses now, side by side.

"How you hate yourself!" she exclaimed. "And, incidentally, us."

"Do I?" he answered.

"You ought to be proud of being the largest landowner in the county. You may have reasons for hating yourself. You may be even a less pleasant person than you seem. But why any one in their senses should hate me, I cannot imagine. See how I have returned good for evil. I took an interest in you from the first."

"An interest?" he repeated scornfully. "I was an object of curiosity to you. It was amusing for you to test your powers upon an Italian peasant lad."

"I never imagined that you were a peasant lad, and I can assure you that I was very much in earnest."

"You flatter me," he murmured.

"You certainly didn't flatter me," she rejoined. "Not by your actions, at any rate. Tell me, after you had decided — when you heard that gate close — did you never think of me again?"

"You were the curse of my thoughts for days," he assured her.

"I'm delighted!" she exclaimed. "You've restored, at any rate, a little of my self-respect. — Round to the right, here. Lucky you have me to show you the way home, or you would never find it. — Now tell me how long the curse lasted?"

"Not long," he replied. "Fortunately, I under-

stood. You were just a somewhat sentimental young lady, amazed to see a poor Italian peasant lad about to give his body and soul to God, instead of elbowing his way with a million of his fellows along the muddy ways of life."

"Rhetorical but inexact," she scoffed. "They need not be muddy."

"They can never escape from it," he declared confidently. "Temptation itself is ugly. To breathe the same atmosphere as worldly people, lead their lives, and jostle shoulders with them brings one down to their level."

"If you feel like this," she asked, "why did you leave the monastery? You seem to hate your possessions, your relatives, and yourself. Why didn't you stay where you were?"

"I have not told you all that I feel," he answered gloomily.

They had reached a level stretch of the heath. She touched her mare with the whip.

"Come on," she invited. "This is one last chance of a gallop."

They pulled up in about a mile — Monica a little breathless. He leaned down and opened the gate to which she had pointed — a gate which led into a narrow country lane.

"Is this the end of the heath?" he asked, almost wistfully.

"Every scrap of it," she answered. "Besides, we're twelve miles from home, and I'm getting hungry. Now, ride quite close to me, please. I want to talk to you."

He obeyed without remark. His habitual impassivity of expression was back again. His lips seemed locked and his eyes were looking into vacancy.

"Do you know that you have behaved very generously to us all?" she said.

"I am glad you think so," he replied.

"But you won't be thanked?"

"You shall thank me in the future if you still wish to do so."

She sighed.

"You've gone away again," she complained. "Just as I hoped that you were going to be a little human! Are you going to live in the clouds all your life, Francis?"

"I do not know," he answered.

"You will be very lonely," she warned him. "I am your cousin, and I am a very nice girl. Why won't you be friends with me?"

"If you understood," he told her, "you would not care about my friendship."

"Understood what?" she demanded.

"The sort of person I am."

"Rubbish! Why don't you take me into your confidence a little, as you do Eustace? Tell me what manner of life you are going to lead, what you are going to do with yourself?"

"You will find that out soon enough."

"But I prefer to be told. Why not confide in me as readily as in Eustace? I'm much more intelligent."

"Lady Monica," he began —

"Don't be absurd," she interrupted. "You'll have to call me 'Monica' sooner or later, whether you want to or not. — Now then, why won't you talk to me about your plans?"

"Because they are, at present, unformed."

They reached a stretch of turf across which they cantered — an obviously welcome diversion for Francis.

Towards the end of it she swung purposely in front of him and, looking round, laughed into his steadfast face.

"You dear solemn cousin!" she exclaimed, as they turned into the lane again. "Still, you did think of me in your cell, didn't you?"

"For a time," he admitted.

"Did you like thinking of me — Francis?"

"Not in the least."

"Why not?"

"Because in that environment to think of you was a sin."

She laughed.

"Well, aren't you glad that you can think of me now without its being a sin?"

Her eyes challenged his. He looked at her coldly.

"I do not wish to think about you," he said. "I do not propose to."

Her laugh this time was scarcely natural. A slight flush of colour had risen to her cheeks. The poise of her chin was suddenly a little haughty.

"My dear man," she assured him, "if I want you to, you'll have to. I haven't quite made up my mind yet whether I want you to or not. — Here's one of your lodges. Go through that gate and steer for that clump of elms in the distance, and you'll save a couple of miles. Good-bye!"

She cantered off, with a wave of the hand. The woman who came out from the lodge to open the gate shaded her eyes with her hand for a moment, then curtsied low. Francis turned to her with a sudden question.

"You recognise me?"

The woman smiled.

"No one who had ever seen your father could fail to recognise your Grace."

She watched him gallop off across the park, a little disturbed at his darkening expression.

"Queer folk, these foreigners," she ruminated.

CHAPTER XII

"AMAZING!" Eustace declared fervently. "No other word for it! Amazing!"

Francis, from the depths of an easy-chair, raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

"Why, the whole thing," Eustace continued, with a little explanatory wave of the hand. "This little suite, for instance, which I can't remember that we ever used. Why, it looks like a room in a palace! Where did you get those tapestries?"

"Christie's."

"And the bronzes?"

"Christie's, too. I was there for several hours on Thursday. I bought that small Greuze. There was a great deal of competition for it."

"I saw your purchase of it in the paper," Eustace observed. "Six thousand pounds! A bit stiff, what?"

"I wanted it," was the indifferent reply.

"A damned good reason, too," Eustace agreed. "You seem to have the knack of picking up the right things, Francis."

"Glad you approve."

"And as to yourself," the young man went on — "well, I never saw such a change in my life! Six weeks ago, you know, in that ready-made black suit, and your hair hanging down over your ears — well, you were a bit out of the picture! And now, my tailor told me this afternoon, Francis ——"

"Pray don't betray your tailor's confidence," Francis

interrupted. "Where are you going to take me this evening?"

Eustace glanced at his watch.

"I am going to take you to see the most dangerous and the most talked-about woman in London," he announced.

"Capital! What time do we start?"

"In a few minutes. I am going to take you to see Mrs. Felicia Dringe."

"Lady who dances?"

Eustace nodded.

"I see you've heard about her. She was well born but a divorcée. Kicks up her heels a bit, and gets excused on the ground of 'temperament.' You'll meet a quaint lot there, but they're generally worth while."

"It sounds like a sort of enterprise likely to attract me," Francis declared. "If you will ring the bell, we will have the car round. Sure you won't try a little more of that brandy before we start?"

Eustace lounged to the sideboard and helped himself. Francis, from his easy-chair, watched him through half-closed eyes. The hand which held the bottle was shaking slightly. There were other indications that the young man's life during the last few weeks had not been one of strict moderation.

"Played racquets this week?" Francis enquired, soon after they had left Chatfield House and taken their places in the car.

His cousin shook his head.

"I ought to get a bit of exercise," he admitted. "Been too busy looking after you!"

Francis smiled.

"Exercise is rather a fetish, I think," he said. "I seldom take any myself."

"You ride in the park at some unholy hour," Eustace reminded him.

"Only when the fancy seizes me. I find it rather hard to break myself of the habit of early rising."

"There'll be the shooting coming along directly," Eustace observed. "That'll soon put us in form. By the bye, how did you get on at the shooting grounds?"

"Well enough. I do not think that I shall trouble to go there again. I shot snipe sometimes when I was a boy. They were more difficult than those black things they call 'clay pigeons.'"

"You'll find the Chatfield pheasants are teasers," Eustace warned him. "Here we are! Before we go in, Francis, you know what you're up against? You've asked for this sort of thing, remember."

"You are absolved from all responsibility," was the calm assurance.

They turned in at a short avenue and pulled up in front of a long white stone house — a house from no window of which came a single gleam of light.

"Are you sure that we have not made a mistake?" Francis asked, a little doubtfully, as they mounted the steps. "The place seems uninhabited."

His cicerone smiled and pointed to where a dozen or more cars were waiting on the other side of the avenue.

"Felicia has fancies," he said. "Every window is heavily curtained, and all the lights have those sort of dark shades on — Oriental effect, I suppose."

The door was opened without a moment's delay. A manservant relieved them of their coats and hats and invited them to follow him. They were ushered into a large and crowded apartment with a buffet table set against the wall and little groups of men and women of all ages and conditions sitting and standing about.

The further end of the room was hung with heavy black curtains.

"Felicia isn't here," Eustace whispered. "I expect she's getting ready to dance. "That's the studio on the other side of those curtains. Now then, who shall it be? There's Mrs. Deane, the authoress of twenty or thirty novels — silly woman I call her, but brainy. She's talking to old Ponder-Blossom over there — Sir George Ponder, you know — great sport! Then, just on your left here is Stein, the man who owns all the race horses. The woman in the corner ——"

"Who is the young lady," Francis interrupted, "who has just got up from the table in the corner and who seems to recognise you?"

"Peggy Layton. Musical comedy. They say she's only twenty-two but she's as go-ahead as they make them. What about it?"

"Present me, if you please," Francis begged.

Some masonic sign must have passed between Eustace and the young lady, for she came smiling over to them. She was very daringly dressed, although her simply arranged hair and large blue eyes supplied a contrasting touch of the ingénue. She welcomed Eustace as an intimate.

"Like to present my cousin," he said. "The Duke of Chatfield — Miss Peggy Layton. Excuse me one moment. Stein has a horse running to-morrow I want to know something about."

He plunged into the crowd, leaving them alone together. Miss Peggy, it appeared, was a little shy. She looked up at her companion almost timidly.

"There is an empty table just behind us," she suggested. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Certainly," he assented.

A waiter brought them wine. Miss Peggy gradually regained her confidence.

"We've all been hearing such romantic stories about you," she confided.

"Really," he answered, "I am afraid that I am a very unromantic person."

"You don't look it," she assured him. "But then you have lived in Italy all your life, haven't you? How wonderful to live somewhere else. One gets so tired of England."

"You are rather young to be tired of any place."

She smiled.

"I am twenty-two, and I feel that I have lived a very long time. London is a terribly monotonous place, though, for any one like myself. We are all the time meeting the same sort of people — and expected to behave in much the same sort of way. You can't imagine what a relief it is," she added, raising her eyes, "to talk, if only for a few minutes, to some one who is different."

"I am afraid," he warned her, "you will find that the only difference between me and these others is that I am a complete stranger here. I am indeed very ignorant of the things I ought to know about."

"It is wonderful," she remarked, "to think that you have never been in England before. I suppose it would sound stupid to ask how you like it?"

"So far," he confessed, "I am a little lonely."

A very attractive smile parted her lips.

"So you came here to lose your heart to Felicia."

"Is she so very beautiful?"

Miss Peggy made a little grimace.

"If she were only beautiful one might sometimes compete," she sighed. "She is terribly fascinating,

though. Nearly every man she talks to for five minutes is in love with her. She has a most unfair monopoly."

"Shall I be the exception then?" he suggested.

"I don't think you're strong enough to resist."

"I am gaining strength every moment," he assured her.

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

"To resist any one else."

She laughed. She had the trick of soft laughter, which in common with most other men he found attractive.

"You say these things as though you were reciting them from a copy book," she declared. "Has Eustace written you out a few sentences to speak when you are introduced to a young lady?"

"Eustace hasn't gone so far as that," he replied. "At the same time, I admit my inexperience. If I am to have lessons from any one may I not have them from you?"

She studied him appraisingly.

"I am afraid," she decided, "that you would be a refractory pupil. However, I like you. Shall we dance together later on?"

"I have never danced in my life," he told her. "I want to learn."

"Shall I teach you?"

"You would do me a great kindness."

"Do you really mean it? You would have to come to my flat."

"That will make the lesson more delightful," he assured her.

"It will cost you an awful lot of money," she warned him. "Don't look so embarrassed, please. I forgot you didn't know about my little undertaking. We have

a charitable fund for actresses out of work and I give dancing lessons for it."

"I am sure that is very kind of you," he said. "Could I buy out the other pupils?"

"I think you might if you tried. I haven't made a great success of it so far. When would you like to begin?"

"To-morrow, if I may."

"At my flat, twenty Gifford Street, at four o'clock. Unless you like to call at one o'clock and take me out to lunch first? You will find me in the telephone book if you forget the address."

"I shall forget nothing," he promised.

She touched him on the arm.

"Look," she whispered.

Without knowing exactly why, he rose slowly to his feet. The black curtains had been parted on either side a few inches, and were being held in their place by fingers of ivory whiteness. A woman's face stole into evidence — white as marble against the black hangings, cameo-like in its stillness, save for the soft curve of geranium scarlet lips. Her eyes — grey, indifferent eyes, heavily fringed — swept over the little company, until they rested upon Francis. Then the curtains were drawn finally asunder and a slim woman in a dress of dead black, unusual in appearance, but in her strange way beautiful, came into the room. She beckoned to Eustace.

"Please bring your cousin to me," she directed. "You know, of course, that I am very angry with you. Fancy leaving him alone with such a harpy as Peggy on his first evening here."

"Case of love at first sight," Eustace declared. "Couldn't interfere, upon my word. Francis, let me

present you to your hostess. The Duke of Chatfield — Mrs. Felicia Dringe."

Francis held her very beautiful fingers for a moment, and the grey eyes looked into his. She was curiously silent in those few seconds. He had time to realise to his surprise that though her face was heavily powdered, the colour of her lips was entirely natural. He realised something else too, and for a moment his eyes looked over her head. When he looked down again, the inscrutable smile had returned.

"Your cousin is not in the least like your description," she said to Eustace. "I have come to tell you all," she went on, "that I have decided not to dance this evening. You can go into the studio and amuse yourselves."

There was a chorus of protests, of which Felicia took not the slightest notice.

"I may change my mind later on," she admitted, replying to a handsome grey-haired man who had just arrived, wearing a long row of decorations. "I have no desire to dance at present, and when I feel like that it is useless."

The light suddenly flared out in the studio behind. The music from some hidden place commenced, and the crowd drifted on to the floor. Francis remained by his hostess's side, although for the moment she seemed to have forgotten him.

"May I ask you a question?" he begged, as soon as the new arrivals whom she was greeting had passed on.

"Well?"

"When you looked through the curtain — were you not meaning to dance?"

"A person of perceptions," she observed, a little

drily. "You shall be rewarded with the truth. Yes, I did."

"Why did you change your mind?"

"I never have a reason for anything. All that I know is that I lost the desire. If it comes again, I shall turn all those people out, whisper for a moment to my musician — but to-night I do not think that the desire will come. You are disappointed?"

"Very," he admitted. "I came to see you dance."

She shook her head.

"You came to make my acquaintance," she insisted. "If I dance you will go away with confused impressions. To-night, you shall meet me, the woman. How do you like me so far?"

"I have no feeling but one of wonderment," he confessed.

"Why?"

"Because you are so different from every one else," was his rather lame rejoinder.

"You think that I am a poseur, of course."

"Are you not?" he ventured.

"Externally. No more. Take my appearance, for instance. I have some powder on my cheeks because I was thinking of an Egyptian dance but I do not use cosmetics. I saw you studying my mouth. Why did you look away suddenly?"

For a single moment Francis was at a loss. She watched him struggling for a reply.

"I will tell you why you looked away," she went on. "You are instinctively a very moral person. You come absolutely fresh into life and you see things. I think that you realised what few people do, that mine is the wickedest mouth in the world. Am I not right?"

"With the exception of your tribute to my char-

acter, I think you are," he agreed. "There is a picture in the public gallery at Pellini by an unknown artist of a woman with a mouth like yours."

"I'm glad you did not refer to 'Mona Lisa'," she said thankfully. "So many people do. And yet, if you were to study our two mouths, you would see that hers is the mouth of a saint compared to mine. — You have just come from a monastery, haven't you?"

"I have. Do you mind very much if we do not refer to it?"

"Of course not! I suppose you realise, though, that it will make you very attractive to the young women of the Peggy Layton type."

"I scarcely see why it should," he answered a little stiffly.

"You are going to be difficult," she sighed. "Why did Eustace bring you to me?"

"Out of kindness of heart, I should imagine."

"Perhaps he wanted me to educate you," she reflected. "Tell me what sort of a life you are going to lead."

"Just the life of other young men."

"You don't look in the least like other young men."

"Eustace is going to mould me," he confided.

"Eustace!" she repeated scornfully. "If you are to be moulded at all into the worldly type, it will have to be done by a woman. I wonder whether it would amuse me?"

"I scarcely think that you could take Eustace's place," he regretted. "There is the turf, for instance — I am thinking of racing — you couldn't help me there. Then I have some idea of owning a theatre."

"These are only the externals," she pointed out a little impatiently. "To tell you the truth, I am sur-

prised that you think them worth while. I'm almost inclined to wonder whether you do."

"These things are expected of me," he observed.

"You could live differently if you chose. There is a great empty space in the world of politics, for instance. You might easily become a leader of thought. You could set a new note for the young men of your generation; they are all very futile. These things seem to belong to you. They would not amuse me, but then I am a pagan. You are not. Why do you wish to become one? You are not following your instincts."

"I wonder how you know what my instincts are."

"I am really rather psychic," she assured him. "Curiously enough, you attract me. I should like to be your mentor. It would not be good for you, but it would amuse me."

"I offer myself your ready pupil," he declared. "You and Eustace shall complete my education. You will find me very plastic."

She looked at him pensively for a moment. Then she turned away.

"Come with me," she invited. "I want to show you my books."

He followed her through the room now crowded once more and out into the hall. He noticed a trick she had of walking past her guests as though she scarcely saw them — a trick which seemed to be a habit of hers, for no one stopped them, although there were several new arrivals. She led him across the hall and down a passage lit by hanging lights, at the end of which she paused.

"This is a room which very few people have seen," she said, opening a door and ushering him in. "What do you think of it?"

He looked around curiously. It was a square apartment of no great size, with black and white walls, a white carpet and black curtains, a huge divan of black satin, and great easy-chairs, also black with orange cushions. There were bookcases in every possible corner, a table strewn with magazines and reviews, on which stood a jade reading lamp. A faint odour of Turkish tobacco hung about the place, mingled with some other perfume — a perfume which he somehow resented. The lighting was obscured by heavy coloured shades.

"Do you like my room?" she asked.

"It is unusual," he replied.

She stood before him, her arms hanging down by her sides, her eyes raised to his. Against the background of black curtains she reminded him momentarily of her first appearance. Her face and arms again seemed unnaturally white, the scarlet of her lips dominant. And more than ever there was the question in her eyes, the faint ironical challenge with which she had first taken note of him.

"Well?" she murmured.

For all his inexperience he realised instinctively that it was the eternal challenge with which he was confronted; the invitation, to which refusal is unknown. A wave of elemental puritanism suddenly swept away the spirit of tolerance which he had courted. He hated the slow ticking of the Chinese clock with its mystic figures, the enervating perfume, the yawning black divan with its orange cushions; more than ever he hated the scarlet mockery of her mouth, the eyes which read him, the virginal straightness of her still body with its enigmatic invitation. — The situation dissolved almost as suddenly as it had come into being. She was still

standing there, but it was only the husk of things that remained.

"Tell me why you came?" she asked, as she led the way to the door. "What do you do in this *galère?* Is it curiosity?"

"No."

"What is it then?" she persisted.

"I should like," he confided, "to know you well enough to be able to answer that question."

"You shall have the opportunity," she promised. "Which is a good deal for me to say under the circumstances."

She led him back to the studio by a way which avoided the reception room. They stood upon the threshold.

"Will you dance?" she asked.

"I cannot."

She was silent for a moment. Then she laid her fingers upon his arm.

"Let us go and sit down somewhere," she said. "I am tired — I want some wine."

They crossed the floor into the reception room. Francis was conscious of a great surprise. Amongst the little group of newly arrived guests was Monica.

CHAPTER XIII

"'The Rake's Progress!'" Monica laughed, as she sank on to a divan in a corner of the studio and made room for Francis by her side. "I had no idea we should find you here."

"I am even more surprised to see you," he replied.

"*Touché*," she admitted. "I was at school with Felicia, you know, and though she tries one rather high I've always kept in touch with her. Bobby and Edna were crazy to see her dance, so I brought them on after dinner. Do you know that you haven't been to see me all the week, Cousin Francis?"

"I have been very much occupied," he told her.

"Yes, I know," she rejoined coolly. "Buying polo ponies, hacks, clothes, lunching at restaurants, patronising musical comedy!"

"These things are a necessary part of the life I intend to lead."

"You will be bored to death in six months," she warned him. "I should make a far better mentor for you than Eustace. There is really nothing so inane in the world as the gay life according to his interpretation of it."

"That remains to be seen."

"Aren't you afraid that the adventure may cost you something of your self-respect?" she ventured.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"After a life of discipline I may find the reaction attractive."

"I do not think you will," she declared. "Licence

itself does not, I am sure, attract you. If it did, I might point out that society can offer you precisely the same thing."

"Through more difficult channels," he reminded her.

"Perhaps," she acknowledged. "The fact remains, however, that I am very worried about you, Francis. I am terribly afraid that for some unknown reason you are going to make a false start in life. There are so many more wonderful things for you than stirring up the muddy places."

"As for instance?"

"You should mix with decent people and marry."

"I shall never marry," he replied, "and the decent people I have met are mostly dull."

"A celibate?"

"From conviction."

She sighed.

"I wish I could speak for a few minutes to the young man whom I met on the ramparts at Pellini."

"I am here."

"You are different," she assured him sadly. "You were a headstrong boy then, but you were at least natural. To-day you — frighten me. There is something sinister about your outlook — your cold craving for dissipation. I should like so much to see you different, Francis. You wouldn't like to shake hands with me, would you, and be real friends? — to let me try to show you what I think would be a more pleasing way through life?"

"My plans are made," he declared harshly.

"But why persevere in them," she protested. "You will find no happiness at the end of the road."

"How do you know that?" he demanded. "There's plenty of the brute in us all."

"There is very little of the brute in you, Francis," she remonstrated, "but there is something which I don't understand. There is something which you keep entirely to yourself, which not even Eustace knows. Am I not right?"

"You are wrong! My life is exactly like any other young man's and I am going to live it the same way."

She leaned forward.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Felicia is going to dance, after all."

The music had suddenly stopped and the dancers had left the floor. The lights went down, until the place seemed filled with shadows. Every one had crowded on to the divans and chairs around the walls, and the popping of corks and babble of conversation in the rooms beyond had ceased. The silence itself was impressive. Then, from some hidden place, a new order of music began — music monotonous at first but without the banality of the Orient, music sad one moment and wistfully passionate the next, so low that they had almost to lean forward in their places and hold their breath to hear it. Felicia was dancing even before they knew that she had entered the room. She danced in the black gown she had worn all the evening, her eyes always far away, her face a gleam of white. She danced with feet which seemed never raised; which seemed never to leave the floor. Now and then in her pauses she appeared to lean upon the air without support or the need of it. Only once did she lift her arms. Save for that single gesture, when they flashed up above her head, she might have been limbless — the dark shadow of a woman, driven by some irresistible force up and down and across the room to the bidding of the music. Now and then she was absolutely motion-

less, as though listening for the faint mystical throbbing of the violin. Then she caught it again and glided off. When at last it died away, complete darkness fell upon the room for a moment. Then every light in the place flashed out. Felicia had disappeared. The friends whom Monica had brought, a Captain Halston and his sister, rejoined her, and Francis was introduced.

"It isn't dancing at all," Edna Halston declared. "It's the spirit of motion, linked up with a new idea in music. It was sweet of you to bring us, Monica. It's like nothing else I've ever seen in life."

"For my part," Eustace confided, "I like to see what's doing! Front row of the stalls, with the limelight well on and Peggy Layton leading the chorus, are more in my line."

"You're a very crude person sometimes, Eustace," his sister sighed. "I feel very ignorant about it, because frankly I don't understand what Felicia meant. Perhaps we weren't intended to understand. It was very wonderful!"

"Well, I don't know," Eustace persisted doggedly. "If I watch a woman dance I like to see her legs. Felicia was just like a little bit of black cloud being blown about to the music. Freakish, I call it!"

Another Felicia was suddenly amongst them. She had changed her gown for an amazing one of apple green. Her black hair had been rearranged, and she wore a Russian headdress. To Francis she seemed like a stranger.

"I apologise!" she exclaimed. "To-night I know that my dancing was vague. There was something I tried to express and which continually eluded me. — What is it Lord Eustace complains of? — that he

could not see my legs! They are there, I promise you, but in dancing, why should they be shown? They are there to carry the body. To-night I danced to an idea of my own. I can dance otherwise when I choose."

"I wish you'd tell us what you were trying to express," Monica begged.

"Impossible," Felicia answered, shaking her head. "I will tell you this much, though," she added, turning for the first time to Francis, "my dance was dedicated to your cousin. — Now you must all come and have some supper."

Monica held out her hand regretfully.

"Our manners are disgraceful," she confessed. "We have seen what we came to see and we must go. We are on our way to the Drummonds' dance. What about you, Eustace? Why don't you both come with us?"

Eustace shook his head.

"Not our sort of show," he declared. "We have other plans."

Monica sighed as she looked for a moment half appealingly at Francis. He listened to Eustace's excuses without comment.

"It seems a pity," she murmured.

Felicia resumed possession of Francis after Monica and her friends had departed. She led him into another reception room where supper was being served at small tables, selected one in a distant corner, and called impatiently for some champagne.

"I am weary," she confessed. "Dancing for you, my new friend, is exhausting."

"I do not understand your art," he said simply. "I have seen no dancing except that of the Italian peasant girls."

"Dancing is not meant to be understood," she told him. "It is meant to be felt."

"That is why dancing to you is exhausting?"

"And why I failed. It was, of course, hopeless."

A servant brought wine and filled their glasses. She raised hers and looked at him for a moment. Then she drank slowly but thirstily.

"I am afraid you think me very stupid," he observed.

"You are stupid, of course," she assented candidly, "but I do not complain. There is a great deal in you which interests me. There is a very large part of yourself which you do not know, a very great deal which is as yet unawakened. — And I am curious too. You have brought with you here — here, of all places, to the world of Peggy Layton and a million other Peggy Laytons, and me, and a few others like me perhaps — a quaintly exotic note of spirituality. I wonder how long it will last? And I wonder many other things. I wonder whether it is really spirituality, or habit, and what that thing in your life is of which you speak to no one."

He looked across at her earnestly.

"How do you know, or perhaps imagine, these things?"

"You have heard what they call me," she answered, "'The Soothsayer.' I am a prophetess of Rosicrucian lore. I am also a woman and very hungry. Please give me some of that chicken salad, and tell me whether it is true that you are going to have dancing lessons from Peggy Layton?"

"It is quite true," he admitted. "It appears that she gives lessons for charity."

Felicia smiled.

"You know where charity begins?" she observed

drily. "I think I would rather give you those lessons myself."

"It would be like one of the great masters teaching a schoolboy to mix his colours. Besides, I could not dance with you."

"Why not?"

He evaded the question.

"I am too clumsy," he replied. "I should tread upon your feet, which Eustace complained that he could not see."

"Eustace!" she repeated, smiling. "What a strangely assorted pair you are!"

"Eustace is my cousin," Francis reminded her. "He happens, too, to be the only young man of my age I know in London."

"Admirably parried," she confessed. "And now tell me, please, why do you not wish to dance with me?"

Francis for the first time broke through the reserve which sat so naturally upon him. He had realised within the last few hours that one phase of his attitude towards life must be modified.

"Because," he announced, "I have certain plans in the world and certain intentions. You happen to be the only person I have met who might divert me from them."

She leaned a little back in her chair. She had the air of laughter, but, as a matter of fact she did nothing more than smile — the same very slight, inscrutable smile.

"How old are you, dear serious man?" she enquired.

"Twenty-five."

"I thought that it must be so," she replied. "Nothing but extreme youth could justify such optimism. Every one starts life with principles and intentions.

No one perseveres. You have a stronger character than most. Therefore, you will suffer more when you give up persevering. That is all."

His eyes flashed for a moment. She leaned over and touched his hand. There was something of half-humorous appeal in her expression.

"We are becoming too serious," she went on. "Some day you shall tell me all about your principles and this terrible secret in the background. — And you will let me help Miss Peggy Layton teach you to dance? You're not afraid?"

He was himself again. He was even able to admire her very beautiful hands.

"I am afraid," he confessed, "but of course I shall accept your offer."

CHAPTER XIV

Francis came in from an early morning ride a week or so later to find Sir Stephen ringing the bell at Chatfield House.

"An early caller," the former remarked. "You'll stay and have some breakfast?"

"Thank you. London hasn't broken you of your early rising habits, I see."

"I ride at eight every morning," Francis announced, "sometimes earlier. We'll have breakfast at once, if you like, and I'll change afterwards. See to it, Johnson, will you? Come this way, Sir Stephen."

The lawyer gave up his hat and followed his host into the morning room. The breakfast table was drawn up towards the open windows which overlooked the park. Francis pointed to an easy-chair.

"Sit down," he invited. "Breakfast will be in directly. You wanted to see me about something or other, I expect."

"In a way, yes," Sir Stephen admitted, with some hesitation. "First of all, may I be sure of one thing? Will you recognise the principle which exists here between a client and a lawyer — especially a family lawyer — that the latter may say anything without being guilty of impertinence?"

"I will recognise that principle willingly," Francis promised.

"Then I want to tell you that you are spending a great deal of money," Sir Stephen said.

"Am I?" was the indifferent reply. "Of course, it's all new to me."

"Lord Henry himself was by no means a careful person," Sir Stephen continued, "and I had to realise several securities to bring your bank account into shape when you took over. You had a reasonable balance then. But they tell me that you have drawn cheques to the value of forty thousand pounds."

"Quite possible," Francis acknowledged.

"Your bankers make no complaint nor are they likely to. Besides being a great landowner, you possess considerable properties, the deeds of which are lodged with them. But I feel it my duty to point out to you that on an income of eighty thousand a year, reduced to sixty thousand by your allowance to the family, and in the face of present taxation, you can scarcely afford to spend forty thousand pounds in less than two months."

Johnson entered, followed by a footman. Silver dishes with tea and coffee pots were placed upon the electric heaters. Francis waved the men away.

"We will wait upon ourselves," he directed. "Now then, Sir Stephen, tea or coffee? Help yourself to anything you fancy under those covers."

"Tea, please. Thanks, I'll look after myself. — Now, what about it?" the lawyer added a few minutes later.

Francis smiled.

"Well," he said, "I dare say I've spent forty thousand pounds. Never having had forty thousand farthings to spend before, it is even possible that I may have been extravagant. The worst of it is that it seems to me that I shall be drawing a great many more cheques within the course of the next few weeks."

"Good God!" Sir Stephen exclaimed. "You're not serious?"

"Perfectly," Francis assured him, carefully preparing his tea. "I'm going to look at some yearlings tomorrow afternoon, and I might easily spend five or ten thousand pounds. One can't start a racing stable for nothing. Then there are a few bronzes to be sold on Thursday that I rather fancy. And there's a small Perugino offered privately. You ought to see it, Sir Stephen. There were half a dozen, as you know, in the gallery at Pellini, but to my mind they did not touch this one."

"This is all very well," Sir Stephen declared, "but I must speak to you plainly, Duke. You have a very fine income, but you can't afford everything you happen to fancy."

"I suppose not," Francis agreed. "What about these properties you spoke of?"

"Sound railway stock, Consols, War Loan — all trustee's stock — to the tune of nearly six hundred thousand pounds. Your father was by no means an extravagant man. The estates prospered very much more during his régime than with Lord Henry."

"Six hundred thousand pounds," Francis repeated. "Capital! Well, sell out a hundred thousand. That'll do to be going on with."

Sir Stephen was aghast.

"My dear sir!" he exclaimed, suddenly laying down his knife and fork. "My dear Duke! Forgive me. You can't possibly be in earnest. Sell out capital! It's unheard of."

Francis appeared puzzled.

"Why unheard of?" he demanded. "There's six hundred thousand pounds to play with, isn't there, be-

sides the income from the land, which I take it must bring in nearly sixty thousand a year? It's my money, isn't it? — my money to spend or to leave alone, whichever I choose? "

"Certainly it is your money," was the dignified admission. "But there is another way of looking at it. There are certain responsibilities appertaining to your position. You are the head of the House of Chatfield. It is your money to spend, discreetly and honourably, with due recognition of your obligations. Spend the interest, if you will, but the capital! — the capital belongs to Chatfield."

"No trust or anything, is there? "

"There is no legal trust."

"Nothing to prevent my doing what I like with my own money? "

"Nothing in the world."

"Then you'd better sell out that hundred thousand pounds' worth during the day," Francis directed, equably.

Sir Stephen abandoned his breakfast. He rose to his feet.

"Your Grace," he said formally, "I do not understand."

"Is it necessary that you should? " was the cool reply.

"But what do you want with money like that? You haven't been gambling or anything, have you? There hasn't been time yet."

Francis helped himself to more tea.

"Sir Stephen," he observed, "you are disturbing yourself a great deal about a trifle."

"A trifle! " the lawyer gasped.

"A hundred thousand pounds is only a trifle, when

you have another five behind and the income from the Chatfield Estates."

"But the property needs keeping up. Besides, there are the taxes."

"Why do you worry?" Francis asked. "I don't."

"If you go on like this, what is to become of your successor?"

"I'm not sure that that interests me."

"But you will marry. You may have a son."

"Never."

"In any case, there are plenty of male heirs," the lawyer declared.

"No need for me to provide for them," Francis remarked indifferently. "In any case, I don't mean to. One hundred thousand pounds into the bank within the next few days, if you please, Sir Stephen. I shouldn't wonder if that Perugino didn't fetch between six and seven thousand pounds — a masterpiece, I can assure you."

Sir Stephen resumed his place. He did not, however, attempt to finish his breakfast.

"Three months ago," he reflected, "you were in the monastery."

The young man's eyes flashed.

"I shouldn't remind me of that, if I were you."

"It was I who brought you away," Sir Stephen persisted.

"You will probably live to be sorry for it. However, it's too late now. I'm here, established, ninth Duke of Chatfield, and five hundred thousand pounds more to spend before we begin to talk of mortgages."

"Mortgages!" the lawyer gasped. "A mortgage on Chatfield land!"

"It will very likely come to that," Francis declared.

"You can't imagine, Sir Stephen," he went on, crossing his legs, lighting a cigarette, and passing the box across to the lawyer, "how amusing it is to spend a little money after a lifetime of privations. My father, the late Duke, allowed my mother, the late Duchess, five hundred pounds a year. Out of that she had to pay for my schooling, to keep two servants, and make extra provision for my father's entertainment when he honoured us with a brief visit. I remember that I had the equivalent of a shilling a week for pocket money. It was less than most of the boys at the school got. I was sometimes quite unpopular."

"The allowance was absurdly inadequate," Sir Stephen admitted. "I cannot pretend that I was ignorant of it, because the sum was paid through my firm, but you must allow me to point out that there was no idea in the office, nor had I the slightest idea myself, that your father and mother were married."

"I see," Francis murmured, softly. "That, of course, made the difference. However, my father knew, didn't he?"

"The behaviour of the late Duke is inexplicable," Sir Stephen confessed stiffly. "He had the name everywhere of being parsimonious, but the allowance to your mother, under the circumstances was, I admit, disgraceful."

"His nondisclosure of the fact of his marriage might also be termed a little inconsiderate," Francis observed.

"It was criminal. In justice to the late Duke, however, you must remember that he died as the result of an accident — not a moment for reflection or for final arrangements of any sort."

"It is a question whether an act of justice, an act

of common decency, should be left to one's deathbed."

"A great many men have committed the same mistake," Sir Stephen declared.

Francis shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he remarked, "this conversation was not of my choosing. I was only trying to explain to you, Sir Stephen, that my present extravagance might possibly be due to my penurious youth. It would be a terrible thing if the status of the future Dukes of Chatfield were in any way affected by this reactionary impulse on my part. If that should come to pass, I hope they will remember my justification."

"You speak as though you yourself were not a Duke of Chatfield," the lawyer reminded him.

"To tell you the truth," Francis confided, "I much prefer my mother's family. Of herself I could not speak to you, but her father, my grandfather, a charming old gentleman, an aristocrat, although a pauper; and his brother, the Count of Magressa — alas, his income was less even than ours, but he too was a delightful person. I've had the great happiness of sending ten thousand pounds to be distributed between my cousins. It is a little offering which I shall probably often repeat. Are you going, Sir Stephen? You won't forget, will you? A hundred thousand pounds."

"I am going to consult with Lord Henry."

"I should advise you to do nothing so foolish," was Francis's grim rejoinder. "You cannot say that I am out of my mind. You cannot say that I have not the right to do what I choose with my own money. You cannot deny the fact that so long as you remain legal adviser to the head of the House of Chatfield, it is not within your rights to discuss his actions with

any one, not even a member of the family. If you choose to disclose our conversation, the alternative will doubtless present itself to you."

Sir Stephen looked suddenly older. As the two men stood up, Francis seemed to tower over him; tall, with powerful shoulders, lean limbs, and strength everywhere predominant.

"The hundred thousand pounds shall be paid in at once," the lawyer promised. "I beg your Grace will not take offence at anything I have said. I am a little upset."

Francis rang the bell.

"I am quite sure, Sir Stephen," he said, "that your discretion will come to your aid."

Francis bathed and changed, lit a cigarette and descended to the library. Mr. Moss, the librarian from Chatfield, was there and begged for a few moments' conversation. He was a small man with nervous manners, an archeologist and bookworm, who was content with a ridiculously small salary for the sake of living amongst the books he loved.

"If your Grace will forgive me," he said, introducing a sheaf of papers, "these are the various charitable appeals from hospitals and kindred institutions which have arrived during the last six weeks. In cases where subscriptions have been given before, I have entered the amount in pencil — the County Hospital, I see, for instance, has had five hundred a year for the last fifteen years."

"Five hundred a year!" Francis repeated. "A very interesting sum — especially this morning. What do they all amount to, Moss?"

"Two thousand six hundred pounds, your Grace, on the same basis as before. There are several pensions,

however, which I think you would wish to grant, to be added."

"Pensions?"

"To old servants of the Chatfield estates. Would you wish me to make out the cheques, your Grace, and present them to you for signature?"

Francis laughed shortly.

"No."

Mr. Moss was a little surprised.

"I beg your Grace's pardon," he murmured. "What am I to do with them?"

"Just whatever you like," Francis told him. "Personally, I should suggest the wastebasket."

Mr. Moss blinked a good many times behind his spectacles.

"Does your Grace desire the lists revised?" he enquired.

"No, destroyed," was the uncompromising reply.

Mr. Moss was silent. His hands were trembling. He was a nervous man, and the situation distressed him.

"You see," Francis confided, "I have come to the conclusion that my family have been exceedingly extravagant in matters of charity. The amount they've given away is preposterous. Five hundred a year for one hospital! Five hundred pounds is a great deal of money, Mr. Moss."

The librarian remained speechless. It occurred to him at that moment that his own salary was three hundred a year, that he had never saved a penny, that he had a wife and daughter to support, and a boy to educate.

"I am not a great believer in charity at any time," his patron continued, "and I am told that the administration of most hospitals is terribly bad. You can

destroy all those memoranda, Mr. Moss. It is not my intention to give anything away in charity for the present."

"There is a cottage hospital at Chatfield," Mr. Moss began hesitatingly, —

"I remember it," Francis interrupted. "A very picturesque place."

"It was practically endowed by the late Duke," the librarian ventured.

"I don't like cottage hospitals," Francis declared. "Anything else?"

"There is the Convalescent Home for Consumptives, also on the Chatfield Estate."

"Consumptives should not be kept alive. They never recover. Destroy it with the rest. By the bye, Mr. Moss."

"Yes, your Grace."

"What is your own salary?"

"Three hundred a year."

"Mr. Moss," Francis asked, "can you keep a secret?"

"I am not considered a talkative person or addicted to gossip, your Grace," was the quiet reply.

"From to-day, it shall be four hundred. But, if you tell a soul, I shall ask you to leave."

Mr. Moss closed his eyes for a moment of supreme thankfulness.

"I am very much obliged," he said. "The increase will be very welcome. Should your Grace care for me to hold over these applications for a few days in case you should change your mind?"

"Not the slightest chance of it," Francis declared. "You can do what you like with them, but don't let me see them again."

"Your Grace can rely upon my discretion in the matter as far as possible," Mr. Moss promised. "Of course, there are bound to be comments, and, I fear, unpleasant gossip."

"My dear fellow," Francis remonstrated, "I do not require your discretion in this matter. Let it be publicly known that the Duke of Chatfield considers that his family have been ridiculously extravagant in their subscriptions to charity. They have shown too large a spirit of generosity. For that reason I discontinue everything. Five hundred a year to a hospital indeed!"

There was a knock at the door. Johnson announced Lord Eustace Wobury, and Mr. Moss retired to his den to deal with this new problem.

CHAPTER XV

EUSTACE was as usual carefully groomed, but his eyes were red and his manner nervous. He was followed into the room almost immediately by a footman carrying on a tray a bottle of brandy, a syphon and a glass.

"Hope you don't mind, old chap," the newcomer declared, helping himself with shaking hand. "Fact of it is, I had a rotten night last night. Hell of a time altogether!"

"Lose your money?" Francis enquired.

"Lost a packet," Eustace groaned. "Couldn't hold a card after you left. None of us did any good. Felicia was furious because you went off without saying good-by and she must have dropped a thousand."

"I must try the game again some time. It seems to amuse all you people. It rather bored me."

"Bored you! And you won five hundred in three coups."

"I cannot see that that of itself makes for amusement or boredom," Francis observed.

Eustace drained his tumbler and set it down empty.

"You're a queer fish, Francis," he declared. "You seem to want to advertise yourself as a roué, but you make a dashed poor show at it. You play high at *chemie* and it seems to bore you equally to win or to lose. You order wine and drinks and half the time you don't touch them. You encourage these women, particularly Felicia and Peggy, and both of them come

to me with the same complaint — they don't know where they stand with you. Peggy is showing every one the pearl necklace you gave her and every one knows that you've given Felicia the lease of her house. But what's it all mean? They don't understand you, either of them. Nor do I. Why, damn it, you play at having a good time and you don't have it!"

Francis smiled.

"We all have different ways of amusing ourselves," he said. "You seem wound up this morning, Eustace. Anything more to say?"

Eustace took an aspirin from his pocket and swallowed it.

"Let's toddle round the park once or twice," he suggested. "I want some fresh air. If we find it too hot we can sit under the trees."

Francis acquiesced, but his companion had soon had enough of walking. They sat in the back row of a line of chairs and the latter continued to unburden himself.

"I'm one of those chaps," he explained, "who when they've got anything on their mind, like to get rid of it. You're a clever fellow in your way, you know, Francis — Art, Latin, and all that sort of tosh — but there are several things you don't seem to size up quite rightly over here. My fault, I dare say, as I'm supposed to be showing you the game."

"In what respects," Francis asked, "have I earned your disapproval?"

Eustace groaned.

"Don't talk like that, old chap, with my head aching like hell. Of course, I know you've made a hit wherever I've taken you, and all the girls are crazy about you, but you must remember we've confined our

attentions to Bohemia, and there's a sort of etiquette about the thing that I ought to have explained to you. Just to give you an example, you took Peggy Layton to the Ritz for luncheon the other day."

"It was she who selected the restaurant," Francis observed.

"Just so, but if you hadn't been a greenhorn she wouldn't have cheeked it. The Milan or Mario's are the places for Peggy. It isn't the thing for you to advertise yourself at the Ritz with a musical comedy actress. It puts your friends in an unfair position. Jolly bad form, you know. Then you actually sat in the front row of the stalls with her the other night at the Hilarity. That's all wrong."

"What should I have done?" Francis asked.

"Well, if you must take her, go in a box and sit behind the curtain. People can see you then or not, as they choose. Then, if I were you, I wouldn't be going to Mario's for lunch all the time. It's all very well to patronise those sort of people but you don't need to associate with them. The grillroom at Mario's isn't exactly the place for the Duke of Chatfield to hang out all the time. You don't mind all this, old chap?"

"Not in the least," Francis assured him. "I am deriving great enjoyment from your conversation."

Eustace looked at him doubtfully.

"Well, I've got to point these things out to you, you know. The governor was on to me about it yesterday. Seems to think you've lost your head a bit with these gay ladies and supper parties and what not. You won't take your seat in the House and you won't come and dine to meet the clan. You won't even return calls. There are heaps of relatives clamouring

to grasp you by the hand, and you won't even shed a pasteboard on them."

"As a duke I fear that I am somewhat of a failure," Francis sighed.

"Now don't take it like that, old chap," Eustace begged. "I tell them it will be all right in a few weeks and that you'll trot out and face the music. Hard luck if you can't have a bit of a fling after all you've gone through."

"Do your best for me, Eustace," his cousin enjoined. "I may change at any moment. By the bye, does all that you were saying about Miss Peggy Layton refer to Mrs. Dringe, too?"

Eustace, who was sitting hunched up on his chair, pushed his immaculately brushed silk hat a little further back on his head and scratched his chin. It was an attitude which with him betokened profound deliberation.

"That's rather a nice point, Francis," he confided. "You see, Felicia started from the right stable although she didn't run the course. You can't place Felicia. At the same time, if you were to ask my advice, I should say, why advertise your little affair with her? It wouldn't matter so much for me, but even though we're the same age you're the Duke, you know — one of those fellows with what they call a stake in the country and an example to set and the rest of it. In any case, where's the trouble? Felicia hates restaurants. You can dine with her as often as you like. You can smuggle her into Chatfield House for a little *dîner à deux*. You've no idea how cleverly those things can be arranged if you've the right people about you. — Hullo, here's Monica! Frankly, I can't face her this morning, old chap. Make my excuses. Say I had

to see a man about a horse. That ass Halston's certain to have told her of last night."

He disappeared hastily. Monica looked after his retreating figure.

"I'm afraid that means misbehaviour," she observed, as Francis rose to greet her.

"Eustace has gone to see a man about a horse," the latter informed her.

Monica made a little grimace.

"Will you walk with me or shall I sit down with you?"

"Sit down with me," he begged. "If we walk, people are always stopping you, and then you introduce me and I don't know what to say and I might as well be with anybody."

"Do you care whom you're with, then?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, I do," he assured her. "I like being with you. I feel that one of the penalties for this wild life into which I have plunged is that I shall probably see less of you."

"Not necessarily. I enjoy hearing about it. I am told that you lunch every day at Mario's grillroom. Is it really amusing? Why don't you take me?"

"My dear Monica," he said, "if Eustace heard you say that, his hair would stand on end. I have had a lecture from him already this morning. Don't you understand that there are different sets of places for different people. For instance, you may ——"

"Oh, be quiet," she ordered. "I don't want Eustace at second hand poured out upon me. The funny thing about Eustace is that though he's a terrible little rip he's also frightfully conventional. Take me to lunch at Mario's grill, Francis."

"I dare not face your brother's wrath," he confessed. "Furthermore, I am engaged to lunch with Felicia Dringe."

"Cat!" Monica exclaimed. "Well, tell me all about it, Francis. Tell me how you're liking late hours and stuffy rooms and jazz music and wiping a girl's lips before you kiss her, and that horrible feeling in the morning when you've drunk too much champagne."

"A wonderful life," he declared.

"It seems to agree with you. You look very fit. Were you riding this morning?"

"At eight o'clock. After which I had Sir Stephen for breakfast and a severe lecture."

"And afterwards Eustace," she murmured. "They are leading you a life!"

"Why don't you scold me for not coming to your dinner parties, and for mixing with the wrong sets of people?" he asked curiously.

"It isn't because I don't care," she assured him.

"Then why don't you?" he persisted. "Every other member of your family tries to say a good word in season to me when I come across them. You hear of my doings and you smile. You don't approve."

"No, I don't approve and I don't understand," she admitted after a moment's hesitation; "and as I don't understand I don't meddle. I think I understand this much, though," she went on, "which the others don't. You have a very much stronger character and a stronger will than any of them. Everything that they could say you know beforehand. So what is the use of any one's trying to influence you?"

"Monica," he said suddenly, "I wish you weren't a Chatfield."

"You don't like being my cousin?"

"I think I like it better than being Duke of Chatfield," he confided.

"You pay me a great compliment! Now, as I have spared you all advice or lecturing, I am going to ask you a question. Are you enjoying life?"

"I am doing what I wish to do."

"That is not an answer to my question. Are you enjoying life?"

He was thoughtful for a moment.

"I don't think, since I was a child," he reflected, "that I have ever set out to enjoy anything."

"I don't think you have," she assented softly. "You have lived as you are living now, for duty — or for something else. I wish I understood."

"You speak of pleasure," he said. "Well, I will be frank. I find pleasure difficult. One way of securing at least an hour or two — a mad idea, of course ——"

"Explain at once, please," she begged, as he hesitated.

"What I should really enjoy," he went on, "would be to fetch you in the car at half-past seven to-morrow morning and to drive down to Chatfield — we could be there at half-past ten — then to ride over that heath where I found you the day after I arrived, have our lunch somewhere down by the sea, get back to the castle and rest for a time under the trees and motor back to London, just as it is getting cool."

She looked at him curiously, a little wistfully.

"You would really like that?"

"I should," he assured her.

"I should like it too," she admitted. "But, Francis," she went on, after a moment's indecision, "you know I'm tolerant enough. I listen to what people say

and it makes no difference, but I have my little vein of quixotism too, or sentiment, or whatever you like to call it. I should love to spend with you just the day you have described, but I have to ask you something first. Just a word."

There were humour and understanding in his eyes, as he met her questioning glance.

"I have wiped no one's lips," he assured her.

"Felicia's are natural."

"I didn't know."

She rose to her feet with a little sigh of content.

"It will be a wonderful day," she declared enthusiastically. "I shall bring a linen riding habit and the lunch."

CHAPTER XVI

All traces of luncheon had been removed from the polished oak table with its fine lace mats and single bowl of roses. A dish of peaches, a decanter of wine and a small coffee equipage were the aftermath of the feast. Felicia leaned back in her chair, a cigarette already between her provoking lips.

"Some day you must take me to this Italy of yours," she said lazily. "I have been to Rome as a tourist, and to Florence on a duty visit — my mother lived there for years. Somehow or other I never imbibed any atmosphere. I was always with the wrong people or doing the wrong thing."

"Unless one is careful, in London especially," Francis remarked, "it seems to me very easy to spend a lot of time with the wrong people."

"Do you like being with me, Francis?" she asked.

"Do I not prove it?"

"I am not sure that you do. Do you realise that I had to ask you to lunch four times before you came — you who pride yourself on having no engagements?"

He knocked the ash of his cigarette on to his plate and made no remark.

"You drop in about midnight often," she went on. "You give me the advertisement of your presence here freely. You have even taken me to lunch or dine in public places once or twice. When I ask you to come here alone you are more difficult. Why?"

"Because," he answered after a moment's hesitation,

"I have very little to offer in the way of entertainment. I have lived alone for so long that I am rather a dull fellow. Perhaps I shall pick up more confidence later on."

"With me?"

"I cannot tell."

"You find Miss Peggy Layton easier?"

"Much," he admitted.

Her delicately arched blue-black eyebrows seemed to grow closer together.

"I am told that you are her very good friend. Is that true?"

"In the sense you mean it, it is untrue," he answered.

She drew a little breath. Something tense seemed to pass from her face. Her eyes were full of unspeakable things.

"Why do you let people believe it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Can I stop it?"

"You permit yourself to be seen with her."

"It sometimes amuses me."

She shook her head.

"I do not believe it," she said. "There can be nothing between you and the Peggy Laytons of the world. She could never be even an amusing plaything for you. That is where you puzzle me sometimes. You affect a banality you do not possess. You're a cryptic person, Francis."

"No one could call you obvious," he reminded her.

"All the same, people believe that I am. All London is saying to-day — all London that is interested — that Felicia Dringe is trying everything she knows in life to secure her new admirer. They remember that I took you into my little sanctum where so few men have

penetrated — did you see the leers and the smiles when we came back? They know that you gave me the wonderful jade necklace every one wanted. They see your car turn in at these gates and they have only one thought: 'I have got you. How long shall I be able to keep you?' As a matter of fact, you have never kissed me yet, Francis, have you?"

"Never."

"You have been so near my lips many times," she went on reflectively. "No man has been so near before without losing or pretending to lose his head. You are not so very far away now, are you, Francis?"

He smiled — an irritating smile to her, for she could not fathom the thought which lay at the back of it.

"Further, I think, than I have ever been," he answered. "Certainly further than I was when you showed me your black-and-white sanctum."

She rose abruptly to her feet and moved around the room, plucked a drooping rose from a bowl, glanced at herself in a mirror, wound up a small French clock. She moved with light and languorous grace; her walk was like the walk of no other woman. Her black hair was brushed smoothly back from her forehead, although it drooped a little over her ears. Her grey eyes were framed with faint purple lines. Her dress of grey velvet seemed to hang straight from her shoulders save for a restraining girdle. Except for the flaming scarlet of her lips she still preserved that impression of almost mystic colourlessness which he had first associated with her. Presently she came back and stood by his side, her hand resting on his shoulder.

"Forgive me, please," she begged. "I am nervous to-day. To make you a confession I must tell you that I was very foolish last night. I went to one of

these silly gambling parties and I not only lost a great deal of money but I sat up very late. No one else but you would have seen me before evening. I am sure I'm not fit to look at."

"You had better let me go away," he suggested. "Then you can rest."

"On the contrary," she replied quickly, "if you leave me just now I shall be disturbed for the rest of the day. Come into my little room. I will show you the sketches that Frenchman has just done of me."

"I have ordered my car," he told her, "for three o'clock. I am going on to Lord's for an hour."

"Your car can wait," she rejoined brusquely. "When I am ready to let you go, I shall tell you."

He followed her into the jasmine-scented room, with its cool twilight and general air of repose. She played strange soft music to him, — music which puzzled him even as her dancing had done; which seemed indeed in some manner reminiscent of it. Always her fingers seemed to be reaching for something beyond; always the half-wistful, half-plaintive note predominated. It was music which was in a way tantalising. Francis found himself listening eagerly, even though with a certain dread, for the note of passion and accomplishment, always threatened yet never reached. When she left off, it was with a little crash, which seemed like an avowal of despair.

"I wonder whether you understand my dancing, my music — me?" she speculated. "I don't think you do."

"I understand that you give me a great deal of pleasure," he said.

"Does it satisfy you?" she asked swiftly.

He was spared a difficult reply by the silent entrance of Felicia's maid. Her mistress turned to her in

cold anger. The woman entered into a voluble explanation in smothered French. Finally Felicia dismissed her with a curt nod.

"From Parnassus to the most sordid thing on earth — a baccarat debt!" she exclaimed bitterly. "There is a man here who refuses to go — a man to whom I lost money last night. I was foolish enough to tell him to come here to-day. Will you excuse me for five minutes? I will not be longer."

"Tell me," he asked, "is this — inconvenient?"

"It is not your affair," she answered.

"May I not be allowed to make it mine?" he begged. "Let me see this man and arrange with him. Our friendship should carry us thus far."

She hesitated.

"What an obvious situation," she declared contemptuously. "I ask you to lunch. I spend an hour trying to make myself look attractive. I give you many openings for polite speeches. I make music for you. And behold, my creditor arrives. It is all so obvious, isn't it?"

"You are not quite yourself, Felicia, when you talk like that," he reproved her. "I will see this man. Where is he?"

"In the room opposite," she said. "His name is Ambrosius."

She turned back to the piano. Her head was bent. She reminded him for a moment of a crushed, exotic flower.

"Don't come back," she begged — "unless you want to very much."

Francis crossed the hall and opened the door of the reception room opposite. A burly, clean-shaven man, very carefully dressed, with a round face, hooked nose,

piercing eyes and a humorous mouth, was standing at a table examining some journals.

"Mr. Ambrosius," Francis began.

The man looked up and dropped the magazine which he was holding in his hand. He staggered back for a moment and gripped at the mantelpiece. He stood there breathing heavily during the brief silence that followed.

"Mr. Ambrosius," Francis repeated. "Brother Ambrose!"

The man pulled himself together.

"I'm not denying it," he said defiantly. "I'm not denying anything. I robbed the monastery. I broke my vows, and I am here, enjoying life very much, and with every intention of going on enjoying it. You're in the same box."

"I am not," was the stern reply. "I was granted a dispensation by the Pope."

"Because you turned out to be an English nobleman," Ambrosius retorted. "Anyhow, you came away when you had the chance. I had to come away. I was a man. I had no wish to be a monk. The life was driving me mad."

"You took the final vows," Francis reminded him. "I never did."

"In a moment of terror," the other acknowledged. "I believed that I had killed a man in a quarrel at Orvieto. I fled to the monastery for refuge. Then I heard that he had recovered. I stood it for three years — I don't know how. There was blood in my veins, not water. I loved women and wine and life. The sight of the women working in the fields used to make a madman of me. One day I could bear it no longer. If I had not escaped I should have gone mad."

"You robbed the monastery."

"It was no good coming away empty-handed. I've returned the money with interest."

Francis walked to the window and back again. There was another car outside beside his own — also a Rolls-Royce.

"Are you the Mr. Ambrosius of whom I have heard?" he asked, — "a Greek millionaire?"

"I am the man," Ambrosius admitted. "It is an exaggeration to call me a millionaire, but I am a rich man. My father died last year and left me his business. He was a money-lender in Sackville Street — a Greek who married a wealthy English Jewess. The business now belongs to me."

Francis remained silent. The sight of this man was a shock to him.

"I made a great deal of money," the latter went on nervously. "People in society have taken me up. If you're going to tell this story about me — well, I shall have to go back to the money-lending and nothing but the money-lending. I returned the money, Francis. You yourself came away when you had the chance."

"What is your business here?"

Ambrosius smiled meaningly — a cunning, unpleasant smile.

"I might ask you the same question," he ventured, significantly.

Francis clenched his fist and stepped forward. Ambrosius shrunk away.

"You dog!" he muttered. "Don't dare to speak to me as though I were a partner in your foibles. Now, answer my question."

"The lady of this house," Ambrosius explained, "lost a thousand pounds to me at baccarat last night.

She couldn't pay and she told me to come here this afternoon."

"Get back into your car," Francis directed, "and drive to Chatfield House. Wait till I can see you. I will arrange Mrs. Dringe's indebtedness. I will also speak to you about other things."

Mr. Ambrosius picked up his glossy silk hat.

"I shall be there," he promised.

Francis walked with him to the hall and watched his departure. Afterwards he lingered for a moment, hesitating. From where he stood he could hear Felicia still playing softly to herself — still with that note of interrogation in her music; a question, perhaps, or an appeal, although it seemed to have gained a more definite note; a sadder, more connected strain. He moved softly back into the recesses of the hall, found his hat and stick and stepped into his own car just as the parlourmaid came hurrying up.

"Make my excuses to your mistress," he said, leaning from the window. "Tell her that everything is arranged as she desired."

"Madame is still alone, your Grace," the maid ventured.

The music ceased. Francis heard the sound of the opening of a door. He sat back in his corner. The car had started.

CHAPTER XVII

THE saddle horses were already waiting upon the circular sweep in front of the castle when the long grey car came racing across the park. Mrs. Morrison, the housekeeper, was in the hall, with a maid behind her ready to wait upon Monica. There was an unnecessary breakfast prepared, sandwich tins and flasks upon the hall table, and everywhere a great deal of pleased gossip. "The Duke and Lady Monica down alone from town!" To the simple minds of most of these people the affair was already arranged. Monica, perhaps, appreciated the situation, or rather the imaginary situation, better than her companion, and she was silent for some time after they had started on their ride. Francis too was silent but for very different reasons. He was riding bareheaded; the wind swept through his black hair, bringing light into his eyes, and colour to his cheeks. The complex expression, the sense of an unnatural restraint, which puzzled many close observers, seemed to have left him. He was taking his joy of the sun and the breeze which freshened as they neared the open spaces.

"Francis," she asked presently, "was Eustace with you last night?"

He shook his head.

"My feet were off the treadmill for an hour or two," he replied. "I dined at home alone with some books which Moss sent up for me, and I went to bed early, with a disconnected telephone."

"You see Eustace most nights, though," she persisted. "Do you realise that he is drinking more than is good for him and spending a great deal of money?"

"I am scarcely his guardian, am I?" Francis replied. "Eustace lives, I suppose, according to his tastes."

"Sometimes, I think, Francis," she went on gravely, "that you are being too kind to us — allowing us too much money, I mean. I am quite sure that we are all spending too much — myself included."

"Why spoil such a beautiful morning with sordid reflections?" he complained.

"You are right," she agreed. "I warn you that I am going to talk to you seriously later. Just now let us forget."

They climbed on to the heath, where the wind from the sea came in little gusts, where the air was gorse-scented, the wild thyme grew in clumps, the turf beneath their horses' feet was light and spongy. From the distance came the sound of reaping machines, where the harvest had commenced. In front of them was the blue line of the sea.

"We are carnal creatures," Monica declared. "In the midst of all this beauty I keep on remembering that I am hungry."

"There is a watch tower on the beach," he pointed out, "with a barn attached. I thought if we could get the horses inside we could find a comfortable place somewhere near."

"I have picnicked there quite often," she told him. "We have to bear to the right a little and cross the marsh."

They passed a strip of meadowland, thick with buttercups and marsh marigolds, with a great clump of bril-

liant poppies at its sandy end. The marsh land on to which they emerged was riddled with narrow tidal streams, several of which they crossed. They came out on a sandy bluff and dismounted. Francis led the horses to the barn and secured them. Afterwards they found a shady corner — a sandy oasis with a patch of wild lavender at their feet and the sea only a dozen yards away. They spread out the lunch.

"And to think," Monica exclaimed, with a sigh of infinite content, "that I am supposed to be lunching at Claridge's with an elderly aunt and two cousins, going to a picture gallery afterwards and winding up with a tea dance. We waste a lot of time doing silly things, Francis."

"You have been doing them longer than I have, Monica," he ventured.

"A girl has to," she answered. "A man can always get away. My life is comprehensible to a certain extent. I am hoping to find a man I like well enough to marry who will ask me to marry him. You don't have to stand in the market."

"Must you be married?" he asked lazily.

"Of course I must, you idiot! Is there anything more appalling in the world than a spinster. I am not risking it, anyhow!"

"You have plenty of suitors, they tell me," he remarked, pouring out some wine from the thermos flask.

"I have more than my share," she admitted. "Some day or other I shall give one the fright of his life by accepting him. Just at present I am too worried to think about myself."

"Why?"

"We're all spending far too much money. We're

getting into debt and altogether it's very ignominious. Eustace loves racing and musical comedy young ladies. I adore clothes, and how Dad spends money I don't know, but he does spend it."

"Sir Stephen considers me extravagant," Francis observed.

"Yours is the one life I don't understand in the least," she confessed. "The money, I suppose, doesn't matter to you, but you spend yourself, which is much more important. And I cannot understand what you are getting out of it. You're an enigma to me. I think I'm rather afraid of you."

"Do you mind passing me another hard-boiled egg," he asked, "and the brown bread and butter?"

She handed him the packet in silence. Above them a lark was singing. Almost at their feet the splash of the waves fell and died away. In the background they could still just catch the hum of the reaping machines.

"Somehow or other," he said a little dreamily, "I feel that this is one of those days when one pauses in life. I wish there were more of them."

"You are your own master," she reminded him. "You're not like the rest of us poor slaves, obliged to stay in town. Why don't you come down here?"

"Alone?"

"It's your own fault if you have few friends," she pointed out. "You have not returned a single call. You have refused innumerable offers of friendship and invitations. You have a score of relatives now in London who have never met you."

"They'll lose the desire before long," he remarked.

"Very probably," she assented. "You have made a deliberate choice, you know, Francis, of an unworthy

life. That is Dad's favourite speech about you. He always trots it out after we have asked you to dinner and you have refused. Let's forget about London, Francis. Talk to me about Italy and pictures."

He half closed his eyes.

"The most beautiful picture in the gallery at Pellini," he said — "the picture I oftenest think about — reminds me of you."

Monica settled herself more comfortably.

"Go on," she begged. "Tell me some more."

It was late in the afternoon when they rode homeward. Upon the outskirts of the park they passed a roadside cottage. A child in an invalid chair was lying back amongst the hollyhocks, looking out a little wistfully. Monica pulled in her horse.

"Isn't that Amy Green?" she enquired.

"Yes," the girl murmured shyly.

"Yes, it's Amy, my lady," her mother, who had stepped out of the cottage, added. "They sent her home yesterday."

"But why?" Monica demanded. "I heard she was getting on so nicely."

The woman looked hesitatingly at Francis.

"We had word yesterday from the Board, my lady, that they couldn't keep Amy any longer," the woman explained. "It seems the subscriptions have gone down."

"Subscriptions?" Monica repeated. "I haven't heard anything of that."

"It seems, my lady, that his Grace sent word that he couldn't go on with the five hundred a year he's been giving. They are obliged to close half the beds."

"Absurd!" Monica exclaimed. "Francis, do you

hear that? I am sure, Mrs. Green," she added, "that there has been some mistake."

"We should be very glad to hear it, my lady," the woman replied doubtfully. "Amy was getting on so nicely. I'm afraid, though, that it's right. Mr. Humphries, the steward, was along yesterday and he said that his Grace has stopped all charitable subscriptions."

"Do you know what this all means, Francis?" Monica demanded.

"I think so," he answered coldly. "I'm sorry for the child."

He touched his horse with the whip. Monica leaned from her saddle.

"Mrs. Green," she promised, "Amy shall be back at the hospital within a week. I will see to it. Do you want to go back, Amy?"

"Yes, my lady," the child murmured.

"It might be the saving of her life, the doctor says," the woman declared wistfully.

"She shall go back," Monica promised once more.

She cantered on to Francis's side. He was waiting at the entrance gate which the portress was holding open.

"Francis," she began —

"This is where we gallop, isn't it?" he interrupted her.

He was waiting to help her from her horse when she reached the castle.

"I should suggest you have tea first," he said, "and then change. I see they have set the table under the cedar tree on the other side."

She followed him almost in silence. They descended the terrace steps on to the smooth greensward, from

which the lawns sloped to the lower flower gardens. Half a dozen handsome peacocks were strutting about. In the wood which bordered the gardens a thrush was singing. Monica made the tea in silence.

"Is this true, Francis?" she asked him presently.

"It is quite true," he answered.

She said no more, but the joy of the day seemed to have passed. She was suddenly pale and tired. She ate and drank listlessly. As soon as she had finished, she rose.

"I will have a bath and change," she said. "If we start in an hour's time, will that do?"

"It will get us into London at nine o'clock," he replied. "Any time will do for me."

He watched her cross the lawn and climb the steps of the terrace, the charm of her slim, girlish figure revealed to its fullest extent by her linen riding habit. She walked sadly, though, and he could almost have fancied that there were tears in her eyes as she passed along the terrace, her face a little averted. She was carrying her hat and whip in her hand, and the sun which was playing on the mullioned windows of the western floor caught the gold in her hair and flamed for a moment around her face. She disappeared without a backward glance.

In the car they were silent for some time. When at last he spoke, his tone was harsh and unpleasing.

"Monica," he said, "this friendship of ours is absurd. It must come to an end."

"What have I done, Francis?" she asked quietly.

"You done? Nothing," he declared. "But can't you see what I am? I have no desire to live creditably and honourably and well. That woman spoke the truth. I have ordered the whole of my subscriptions

to charity to be discontinued. I need the money for other purposes."

"It is your affair," she sighed. "I have not blamed you. I can get the child back into the hospital."

"You have not blamed me," he repeated, "but I know what you are thinking."

"That you cannot know, Francis. There are some things about you which I do not understand. There are things about your behaviour which are amazing to me. But however hard I try, I cannot believe that you have not some reason for what you do. I am sorry if you are really going to shut me out of your life."

"There is no place for you in it," he pronounced.

She watched him covertly. The longer she watched, the more contented she became.

"You really mind a little?"

"Yes, I mind," he answered, almost roughly. "I mind a great deal. I like you, Monica. If you knew what sort of a being I was — well, you would hate the thought that you were here by my side. You will know some day and then you will feel like that. That's why we can't be friends."

"There is just one thing I should like to know. Why can you be friends with Eustace and not with me?"

"That's a different matter. Eustace is a man."

"I am glad you said you liked me, Francis," she confessed, resting her hand upon his. "I would like you very much indeed if only you would be reasonable. I have loved being with you to-day, and it's quite a test, isn't it? — very nearly twelve hours."

He suddenly caught hold of her hand, drew it through his arm and held it in his own strong brown fingers. She gave a little start. Her eyes glowed.

"Francis!" she exclaimed softly.

A new feeling had seized him. For a moment the passion of his life was forgotten. They were passing through a pine wood, from the dying sunlight into the scented dusk.

"Monica," he said hoarsely, "you know what I told you. It was true. This is just for this moment, for this hour."

She turned her lips to his. Her arm passed around to his other shoulder.

"Perhaps I am like you," she whispered, as she clung to him, "if it is only for this minute, only for this hour, I want you to take ——"

Her lips were closed by his; his arms enfolded her. They passed out of the wood into the long stretch of lonely road. There was a single star in the sky and the twilight stealing upon them.

CHAPTER XVIII

Francis, on the following morning, received another early caller. Mr. Ambrosius was announced and shown into the room just as he was finishing breakfast. He nodded and pointed to a chair.

"You have breakfasted?" he enquired.

"Two hours ago."

Francis smiled.

"I see that we have both preserved the good habit of early rising," he remarked.

"I was restless last night," Ambrosius confessed. "I want to know what you're going to do."

"On my own terms," Francis replied, "I am going to hold my tongue."

A muttered exclamation of thankfulness escaped from his visitor's lips. Francis rose to his feet and remained standing for the rest of the interview.

"Ambrosius," he said, "I know quite well that you are a graceless scoundrel. There were some of your doings at Pellini to which we have not alluded. There was no necessity for us to allude to them, but I was one of those who knew."

Ambrosius moved uneasily in his chair.

"I was unsuited for the life," he confessed.

"You appear with the help of your father's fortune," Francis continued, "to have thrust your way into some sort of society here. It is not my affair. I am content to meet you as a stranger. I owe nothing to the people whom you may deceive. In return, there is a way in which you can be useful to me."

"Nothing I can do in the world," the man began eagerly —

"You're a money-lender — or rather you have a money-lender's business," Francis proceeded. "I shall send you some friends of mine — relatives. I want you to let them have what money they ask for on better terms than any one else would. I want you to encourage them to borrow. I will be security."

"That's very simple," Ambrosius declared. "I'll charge them half my usual rates with pleasure. Any friend of yours ——"

"You need not quote from your circular," Francis interrupted. "The two people for whom I wish to make borrowing easy are my uncle, Lord Henry Wobury, and my cousin, Eustace Wobury. You will take their notes of hand for all the money you advance, and you will look upon those notes as belonging to me. I shall pay you for them."

Ambrosius was a little puzzled.

"They haven't got anything, you know, except what you allow them."

"How do you know that?"

Ambrosius grinned.

"The governor kept tabs on everybody. His books are the most wonderful record. He's got every member of the aristocracy who's ever borrowed a penny or likely to borrow sized up there with his prospects and particulars about his property."

"The fact that they have nothing," Francis pointed out, "need not stand in your way. I will sign any form of security you suggest, but I want the notes to be always where I can lay my hand upon them. That is perfectly well understood between us?"

"Perfectly."

"Now, with regard to Mrs. Dringe's debt?"

Ambrosius reflected for a moment. His bright black eyes searched in vain his companion's expressionless face.

"Well, to tell you the truth," he admitted, "I wasn't going to be too hard upon the lady. She's not my taste exactly, but they tell me she's quite the vogue in town and I want to be asked to her studio. I think if she could have seen me the other day, we could have come to some arrangement," he wound up, with a smile which was almost a leer.

Francis drew a cheque-book from his pocket and seated himself at a writing table.

"What was the amount of Mrs. Dringe's debt?" he asked.

"A thousand pounds."

He wrote out a cheque and handed it over.

"It is my intention to make use of you, Ambrosius," he said, "but there is no reason why I should not tell you that some day or other you will be horsewhipped. Take that cheque now and go."

"I had no idea," Ambrosius mumbled —

"And go," Francis repeated, grimly, pointing to the door.

Francis bathed, changed his clothes and descended to the library, where he found Mr. Moss awaiting him. The librarian was in a state of nerves. He was not yet used to his good fortune, and he was more afraid of his present employer than he had been of any one during the whole of his life. Francis took note of the anxious gleam in his eyes and the tremble in his voice as he wished him good morning.

"You got my message, Mr. Moss?"

"Yes, your Grace," the little man answered. "I

trust that nothing is wrong. You found the library at Chatfield in good order?"

"As I expected to," Francis replied gravely. "You seem disturbed."

"I am of a nervous temperament, your Grace," Mr. Moss confessed. "I have been in the service of your house for a great many years and I have lost touch with outside affairs. I heard it rumoured that your Grace was thinking of closing Chatfield."

There was an unaccustomed note in Francis's tone; a note which was certainly not present when he talked to his friends or relatives.

"You need be under no apprehension as to your own future, Mr. Moss," he said kindly. "I appreciate your services and as time goes on I hope to make more use of them in the library."

"Your Grace is very kind," Mr. Moss murmured, with a little sigh of relief. "I must admit that I have had apprehensions."

"Banish them," Francis enjoined. "Your salary, subject to a small yearly increase, will only cease with a pension. I sent for you on a confidential matter, Mr. Moss. You have during the last few weeks undertaken secretarial work for me. I need some one in whom I can repose entire confidence; who will ask no questions and exhibit no curiosity. Will you be that person?"

"I shall esteem it an honour," Mr. Moss declared fervently.

"I gave you a list a few days ago of charities to be cancelled."

"The letters have all been written, your Grace, and dispatched."

"Good! I wish you during the day to make out a

cheque for the full amount of those charities and present it to me for signature. You will then approach a solicitor — a stranger to me and known only by repute to you. You will hand him over the money and you will give him instructions to write to each of the charities and say that a client who desires to remain anonymous wishes to make up to them for the amount they have lost by the Duke of Chatfield's withdrawal."

"To make it up? With your own money, your Grace?"

"You and I," Francis said, "are the only two who will know that, Mr. Moss."

"I quite understand, your Grace."

"The cottage hospital at Chatfield is to be specially written to," Francis continued, "and any patient of theirs who has been sent away is to be immediately re-admitted. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, your Grace."

"I am extending to you, Mr. Moss," Francis concluded, "a confidence which I have offered to no one in this country. I trust you to respect it in the spirit as well as the letter."

"Your Grace can rely on me," Mr. Moss assured him earnestly.

Francis drew a catalogue from his pocket.

"To pass on to an entirely different matter, there is a sale at Christie's to-morrow afternoon."

"The Rappelli manuscripts," Mr. Moss exclaimed eagerly.

"Quite so," Francis agreed. "You will attend it and purchase on my behalf the three manuscripts I have marked."

Mr. Moss's weak little red eyes glittered behind his spectacles as he took the catalogue.

"Those are the three most valuable, your Grace," he pointed out, in a tone of deep respect.

Francis nodded.

"Two of them I have examined years ago in Florence," he declared. "The third, I think, has been in England for some time. You will secure them, Mr. Moss, at any price."

"I shall have the greatest pleasure in adding them to your Grace's collection," the librarian declared ecstatically. "And with regard to the other matter, your Grace can rely upon my entire discretion."

Eustace made his accustomed appearance at Chatfield House shortly before midday. He found Francis examining some manuscripts which Mr. Moss had produced for his inspection.

"I say, old chap, Monica wants to see you," Eustace announced.

Francis laid down the manuscript which he was studying.

"Is she here?" he asked.

"Talking to old Madam Griswold in the hall. She's terribly mysterious this morning. She wants to see you for five minutes alone. Afterwards I've a word for your private ear."

"Please bring your sister in," Francis invited.

He sat quite still during Eustace's momentary absence. He had not anticipated seeing her again so soon. The thought of her near presence was a joy, although he shrank from the meeting. He had full faith in her pride but he was suddenly conscious of the meanness of relying upon it.

Monica entered alone, closing the door behind her. Her eyes met his quite frankly, although for a moment there seemed to be an unaccustomed shyness in her

manner. Otherwise there was not the slightest suggestion of memory.

"I suppose I'm a terrible nuisance," she said, seating herself in the chair which he held for her. "You'll think I'm a worse one before I've finished. I've come to ask a great favour."

He stood before her very still and grave. She waved him away.

"Go and sit down, please," she begged. "You look so alarming there I shall never find courage to make my request. — That's right. I'd love to have a picture of you, seated before your desk like that, with those grubby manuscripts in front of you. 'The intellectual Duke', it might be called. I suppose you are clever, Francis, aren't you?"

"Amazingly!" he assured her. "I have just transported Mr. Moss into the seventh heaven of delight. I am by way of being a Latin scholar, you see, and I can read my own manuscripts."

"Well, I'm not going to be afraid of you," she declared, "any more afraid than I am. Now for my favour, Francis. Eustace is waiting about outside like a caged tiger."

"Please go on."

"I am not going to ask you, Francis, to alter in any vital degree the life which you seem to have planned for yourself. You can pursue your apparent ambition to be the uncrowned king of Bohemia. I do not wish to interfere with the tenor of your life in any way. Please understand that. But I want you to make one concession."

"Well?"

"I want you to meet your relatives just once, and all those people who wear us to death with questionings

and wonderings and clamourings. You can be as rude to them as you like. You can leave early if you want to and give a supper party at Mario's afterwards, but please sit at the table with them and let us cease to be the intermediaries."

"Is this your wish or your father's?" Francis enquired.

"Entirely mine," she assured him.

"Any night you please next week I am at your disposal. In return I have a favour to ask you."

"A much easier matter that," she remarked, with a smile of relief.

"I understand," he said, "that there has always been a tenants' dinner and general rejoicings when a new head of the house has come to Chatfield. I may decide to shut the castle up very soon, but in the meantime I desire to give that tenants' dinner and ball. Will you all come and help me?"

"That is no favour," Monica replied, promptly. "I will answer for the whole family. We will support you."

She rose to her feet, and moving to the door before he could reach it or stop her, departed, leaving behind only a memory of a very beautiful young woman, cool and sweet and dainty in her summer clothes, with the light of remembrance veiled in her eyes. Francis remained motionless for a moment, gazing at the door through which she had passed, and which he had been too late to reach. Eustace, entering a little abruptly, was staggered at his appearance.

"I say, old chap!" he exclaimed, "Monica hasn't been dropping any bombshell, has she? You look scared to death."

A very ordinary world, after all, with a very ordinary

young man confronting him. Francis turned back to his desk and lit a cigarette savagely.

"No, I promised to do something I hate doing, that's all," he confided. "Don't tell Monica so, though. I shall go through with it all right."

"You're coming to the family feast?" Eustace cried in some excitement.

"I've promised," was the grim reply.

"Good for you. It will buck the governor up tremendously. So you were down at Chatfield yesterday?"

"Your sister and I were down there together."

"So I heard. Monica must have broken half a dozen engagements. Telephone was going for her all day long, and Bobby Halston was furious."

"We had a very pleasant day," Francis said calmly.

"More than I had. I went down to Newmarket and got it in the neck. I wonder — I hate to ask you, Francis, but I don't know what to do about it — I wonder whether you could lend me a few thou, just to tide over till Goodwood?"

"I dare say I can help you somehow or other," was the equable reply. "It's the ready money that's the nuisance just now. I didn't find a large amount of cash floating about, you know, when I came into possession."

"Any way you can suggest," Eustace declared anxiously.

"Do you happen to know a chap named Ambrosius?"

"I've seen him about — met him once or twice on the race course," Eustace assented. "They say he's a money-lender — fairly rolling in it. But what's the use of him to me? He wouldn't lend me anything on my note of hand. I've no prospects."

"Naturally. But he'd lend you money on very good terms if I guaranteed it."

"Of course he would," Eustace assented enthusiastically.

"Very well. You can go to him and say that I will guarantee up to five thousand pounds. I'll sign anything he sends along to that effect."

Eustace sought for his cousin's hand but did not discover it. He slapped him instead on the shoulder.

"You're a brick, Francis!" he exclaimed. "Gad! That's a load off my mind. I'll hop along and try and catch Ambrosius before luncheon time. I know where he hangs out, somewhere in Sackville Street."

"Number fourteen," Francis announced. "Give him my compliments and tell him to use you well."

Eustace, with his hand upon the door handle, came back into the room.

"I say, Francis," he asked curiously, "where did you come across Ambrosius?"

"Does that matter?"

"Of course not. Only there's a lot of talk about the fellow. Everybody knew the old man, but nobody knew he had a son. It doesn't matter, of course."

"I met him in Italy," Francis admitted. "I do not know a great deal of him but I think I can promise you this: if ever you should require a little assistance you will find him easier to deal with than most of them."

"That's good enough for me," Eustace declared. "Forgive my running off, Francis. See you later perhaps. I shall drop into Mario's for lunch."

Francis made no reply. He watched Eustace leave the room, listened to the closing of the door behind him. Then he turned back to the manuscripts which he had been studying.

CHAPTER XIX

Separated from her knitting, no one was better able to play the *grande dame* than Susan, ex-Duchess of Chatfield. Her husband was also capable of rising to an occasion, and Lady Monica possessed gifts which, as many people, including a few journalists, were never tired of saying, would some day make her one of the most brilliant of London hostesses. The dinner party to Francis, therefore, although its composition was difficult, was a complete success. Francis himself, though taciturn and reserved, was dignified and always courteous. His appearance and manners were obviously a complete surprise to those of his relatives who had heard the scandalous tales of his doings. The impression he made was universally favourable. He even accepted the invitation of Susan's brother, Lord Grantley, to act as his sponsor in the House of Lords, although he was careful to avoid fixing any exact date.

"I must say, my dear Chatfield," the latter remarked on wishing him good night, "that I am delighted to hear of you at Christie's. You have bought several masterpieces lately, I understand, and I must congratulate you particularly upon the acquisition of those Rappelli manuscripts, which I understand that your librarian secured."

"They were almost a necessity," Francis replied. "I noticed a very serious gap in our fourteenth-century possessions."

"Incidentally," Lord Grantley observed, "I heard also that your Latin is wonderful. It is a great thing

to have a scholar as the head of the House of Chatfield, an admirable corrective to any little tendency — er — towards that levity of manners which is so fashionable nowadays."

It was the only reference to his reputed propensities and Francis let it go with a smile. He did his duty to the end, remaining with his host until the last of the guests had departed. Lord Henry was unable to conceal his satisfaction.

"My dear Francis," he said, "I do not wish to bore you, but I feel that I must express my complete satisfaction at your demeanour and general deportment this evening. It was a most auspicious introduction to your family. I can assure you that they are all most interested and gratified."

"I am very glad," Francis rejoined quietly. "They seemed very worthy people, most of them, with whom I am not likely to be brought very much into contact, but if my meeting them has been any satisfaction to you and Lady Susan I am very glad I came."

"That's capital," his uncle declared. "Capital! And as regards that little scheme of yours for an entertainment down at Chatfield, you can count upon us all. The tenants missed their ball last Christmas — we were away on the Riviera. So a little celebration for them will be all the more opportune."

"You will understand," Francis warned him, "that there may be some guests whom you would not expect to meet in London."

"Quite so, quite so!" Lord Henry acquiesced. "Not too much of that, my boy, before your aunt," he added in an undertone, drawing him on one side. "It'll be all right when the time comes. And by the bye, if you are really going to strike a Bohemian note, there's

a little friend of mine — widow of a brother officer in the Yeomanry — charming little woman, but not exactly *persona grata* with the general run, you know."

"I understand perfectly," Francis said. "Mrs. Lois Greening, you mean, don't you?"

Lord Henry was discomposed.

"How in the mischief did you guess whom I meant?"

"I saw you leaving her house in John Street one day, and you were dining with her at Mario's another evening."

"Ah, yes, quite possible, quite possible! The poor little woman's very lonely most of the time. And before you go, don't forget to look in and see Monica. She's downstairs somewhere: as many rooms as a rabbit warren in this house, but none of them big enough to swing a cat in."

"Francis can spare himself the trouble, for I am here," a voice from behind interposed.

Monica, who had changed her dress, had just sailed into the room. She was wearing a gown of smoke-coloured chiffon, and, contrary to her usual custom, a diamond star in her hair. Her maid was standing behind with a lace wrap in her hand.

"I've decided to go to the Herington's ball for an hour," she explained. "Ada Herington has been telephoning — says she's afraid they're short of girls. Would you drop me, Francis, if it isn't out of your way? It's only just in Park Lane."

"With pleasure," he answered.

"Are you going alone, my dear?" her father asked.

"I should if I wanted to," she told him. "It's no use having a reputation for doing daring things, unless you live up to it sometimes, and chaperons are rather out of date. As a matter of fact, though, Aunt Mil-

licent is waiting for me there. If I'm not hurrying you, Francis, I think I ought to go."

He handed her into the car and she sank into the further corner with a rustle of silks and laces. She gave a little sigh as they glided off.

"What slaves we are," she murmured. "I really don't want to go to this silly ball at all. One gets into the way of it and then one goes on feverishly, always hoping that something will happen, and nothing ever does."

"It probably will some day," he remarked tritely.

"Less likely than ever now," she sighed.

He moved uneasily in his place.

"I didn't mean to say that," she continued. "I was breaking an unspoken compact, wasn't I? However, consider it unsaid. I want to thank you for tonight, Francis. I know that you came against your will; I know that for some mysterious reason or other, coming went all against the grain with you. It really won't make very much difference to you in the future, though, and if you knew what it saves me at home, I'm sure you'd be glad."

"It was a small thing to do at your request," he said.

They drew up in front of Herington House.

"You wouldn't like to come in with me for an hour, I suppose?" she asked, somewhat wistfully. "You needn't dance or anything. Lady Herington is such a dear and it would make her so happy."

"I'll come if you like," he acquiesced a little doubtfully.

The listlessness suddenly left her face. She smiled at him brilliantly.

"Why, you dear thing!" she exclaimed. "How

perfectly delightful! We won't wait for Aunt Millicent. We'll go in together and take the place by storm. You needn't dance, you know. There are lots of sitting-out places."

"I'm not at all sure that I sha'n't want to dance," he told her. "I've had lessons."

She indulged in a grimace.

"There are scandalous stories about those lessons of yours," she remarked. "A hundred guineas for charity and a pearl necklace for the tip. A good many people would like to give you dancing lessons, Francis. — That's Lady Herington at the top of the stairs. Isn't she a dear? Watch her face when I present you."

Lady Herington was without doubt overjoyed at being Francis's first hostess, but she was too tactful to be more than quietly cordial. They passed on together to the ballroom.

"You're really going to dance?" Monica asked eagerly.

"If you'll put up with me."

Francis had been well taught and there was no one on or off the stage who danced better than Monica. After the third dance together she led him to a seat. She was still clutching his arm.

"I am not at all sure that I shall ever let you go," she laughed. "I don't even hate Peggy Layton any more. She taught you wonderfully. But then, after all, you couldn't have needed any teaching. You have such an ear for music and you are so strong and light on your feet. Francis, shall you ever forgive me? I can't help it. We're being surrounded."

Francis on the whole carried himself well in a difficult situation. News as to the identity of this un-

expected visitor flashed through the ballroom like wild fire, and every one trooped up to his corner. In less than a quarter of an hour, he knew scores of the young people in London. The elders were beginning to hurry up when Monica rescued him.

"Dance once with Lady Betty," she begged him, "then once more with me, and you shall be a free lance to come or go as you will."

"If Lady Betty will honour me," he said a little stiffly. "I fear that I am a very indifferent performer."

"But you dance wonderfully," his new partner declared after the first turn. "Fancy Monica keeping you to herself like this. Girls are so selfish nowadays."

"Lady Monica is a great friend of yours?" he enquired.

"She is my second cousin," the girl replied. "So are you, only we'd almost despaired of ever seeing you in the flesh. Only last week I was told by three different people that you spent ten hours a day in a London monastery, that you had bought the Hilarity Theatre and were going on the stage, and that you were engaged to marry Felicia Dringe."

"Is that all?" he asked, smiling.

"Well, all I'm going to tell you," she answered.

"I'm afraid," he confessed, "that I'm going to be a great disappointment to everybody."

"You aren't to me," she assured him. "I'm quite certain you're not to Monica. You both looked frightfully pleased with each other when you left off dancing."

"I only learned three weeks ago," he told her.

"Yes, we've heard all about that too," she rejoined drily. "I don't suppose you've had experience enough

yet to judge, but there isn't a girl on the stage who can dance like Monica and there isn't one half so good-looking. They've offered her a fortune to go on the films but she hates the stage and everything connected with it."

"You are a very good friend of Lady Monica's," he observed.

"So is any one who gets the chance," she answered. "You see, I'm bringing you back again as promised. I'm feeling very unselfish, though."

There were a few more introductions, and then Monica claimed him. They danced together twice and certainly nothing connected with Lady Herington's ball attracted more interest than the unexpected appearance and the very attractive personality of this much discussed young man. They were followed all round the room by a buzz of whispered conversation. When at last they reached the door, Monica announced his release.

"You have been perfectly sweet, Francis," she declared. "You can't imagine how much pleasure this has given me. Now, hurry off, please, before you are bored. There's Aunt Millicent in the corner, wondering what has become of me. You needn't say goodby to anybody. Just slip out and condole with yourself upon your dismal failure."

"Failure?" he repeated dubiously.

"Hadn't you made up your mind to be the black sheep of the family?" she asked. "The one really unpopular Chatfield? Well, you've started very badly."

CHAPTER XX

"WHAT a bore!" Monica exclaimed a few nights later at Claridge's, as, after having excelled themselves in the rendering of a particularly intriguing waltz, the orchestra suddenly played "God Save the King."

"We've only had an hour's dancing," Lady Betty complained. "Those stupid people would sit so long after dinner."

Captain Halston, who had been Monica's partner, had a suggestion to make.

"Let's all go on to a club," he proposed. "We could go to Mario's. That's quite decent. Everybody goes nowadays. What do you say, Monica?"

Monica's assent in the ordinary way would have been the readiest. On this occasion, however, she hesitated.

"I don't think we need mind, Monica," another of her companions intervened. "I was there a few nights ago with a party. As long as we're all together, I think it would be ripping."

"Say the word and I'll go and telephone," Halston declared. "Let me see, how many will there be of us? Eight at least. Who's on?"

There was a chorus of agreement. Monica alone still looked doubtful. Of course it was absurd, but the presentiment was there all the same. Mario's was supposed to be one of Francis's haunts, and she was intensely conscious of the fact that she would very much dislike a meeting with him there.

"You'll come, Lady Monica," Halston begged. "The party wouldn't be anything without you."

"Oh, I'll come, of course, if all you others want to," Monica assented.

Captain Halston hurried off to telephone and the young people fetched their wraps. He returned with a smiling face.

"We're in luck," he announced. "It's a gala night at Mario's. Some Johnny's giving a big supper there. First night at the Hilarity, you know. They've got an extension till three-thirty. Every table's taken, but they're putting one in for us. It'll be all ready when we get there."

"Do you know who's giving the party?" Monica asked, drawing her wrap a little closer around her.

"Mario didn't say. You'll come in my car, won't you, Monica? Let's see. Franks has a car, and Judy — heaps of room for all of us."

They started off, a party of eight eventually; Lady Monica and her escort, Captain Halston, Edna Halston, his sister, with Commander Perry, a young man up in town on three days' leave from Portsmouth, and determined to avoid going to bed if possible, Lady Betty and Sir George Durham, a youthful baronet who had just left Oxford and was studying for the Diplomatic Service, Judy Franks and her brother, a very popular couple, the twin children of a famous soldier-politician. They were a distinguished little party and Mario himself met them at the entrance to the restaurant.

"Good evening, my lady. Good evening, gentlemen," he said, bowing. "Your table is all arranged, Captain Halston. We are having a great night here. I have been turning people away for the last hour."

Inside the room the orchestra was playing a popular fox trot. The floor was crowded. There was a distinct atmosphere of boisterous merry-making.

"Whose party is it?" Monica asked, as she prepared to follow Mario.

"The Duke of Chatfield's, my lady," was the confidential reply. "A very excellent patron. He has engaged the whole of the tables on the right-hand side of the room."

Monica was conscious of a sudden sense of revulsion. She would have given anything at that moment to be able to walk out of the place. It was too late, however, for Mario was already piloting them round the fringe of the maze of dancers, and exactly opposite to them, at the arc-shaped table against the wall, generally spoken of as the "Royal Box," Francis was seated, surrounded by a little crowd of stars in the musical-comedy world. On his right was Peggy Layton; on his left a French *danseuse*. Eustace was there. He frowned as soon as he recognised his sister.

"Of course," Monica said, as she took her place, "Eustace will be furious with me. He always says that it is playing it low-down to come to these sort of places. He doesn't bring his little lot to Claridge's, he says, and we ought not to come here. I do feel rather horrid about it."

Lady Betty sighed likewise, as she looked across the room.

"Isn't it too bad, Monica," she exclaimed. "It's Francis who's giving the party and he might have been with us. I invited him — wrote the nicest possible note. What do we do about it?"

"If I catch Francis's eye I shall nod and wave my hand," Monica said. "When one comes to these places,

it's the least one can do. We have to pretend that we don't see who he's with."

"We'll all have to keep tabs on our young men," Judy Franks observed. "The whole of the musical-comedy stage seems to be here — and jolly nice they look, some of them. I think Peggy Layton's the prettiest girl I ever saw in my life."

"So apparently does his Grace, the Duke of Chatfield," Lady Betty murmured, with a little grimace. "Let's dance while Bobby orders the supper."

"Fancy being able to order champagne at one o'clock in the morning!" Commander Perry exclaimed. "The country's coming to its senses after all. Lady Monica, may I have this one?"

Their small party soon settled down. Once it seemed to Monica that she caught Francis's eye and she looked over her partner's shoulder prepared to smile and wave her hand. His expression, however, was perfectly blank. He looked through her with stern disregard.

"A fine-looking fellow, your new cousin," Perry remarked. "He doesn't look as though he were enjoying himself very much, though, does he? There's Peggy hard at him one side and Mademoiselle Cleo the other side, and half a dozen of them waiting to cut in, and I haven't seen him smile yet. He looks a great deal too much of the grand seigneur for this place."

Somehow or other her companion's words were grateful to Monica.

"To tell you the truth," she confided, "I cannot imagine why he does it. I honestly don't believe he enjoys it, and he seems to have so much appreciation for other things. Yet they say he spends half his time here and at similar places, and the latest *canard* is

that he's going to buy the lease of a theatre for Miss Layton."

Monica found it rather crowded for dancing and they finished after a turn or two. Eustace came over presently and exchanged a few words with them.

"I don't think it's quite playing the game," he told Monica in an undertone. "You people have got places enough of your own. A club like this wasn't meant for one's sisters. It's damned uncomfortable for every one."

"Sorry," Monica replied. "I couldn't very well break up the party, though. Every one wanted to come."

"Francis was getting quite human before you arrived," Eustace grumbled. "Now he's gone like a cold saint — courteous to every one and as frigid as the north pole. You've spoilt the whole show."

Monica laughed softly. Notwithstanding Eustace's disapproval, she was conscious of an absurd sense of satisfaction at his words.

"Francis is such a peculiar chap," her brother concluded, as he turned away. "You can never tell how he's going to take things. After that day you and he had lunch together down at Chatfield and his dining at Curzon Street and going on with you to the Herington's, he really seemed as though he were going to — er — play the game. Seeing you here is just as likely as not to put his back up."

"My dear Eustace," Monica protested, "do you imagine for a moment that I should have come if I had known about this party of yours? I wouldn't have dreamed of coming. I know that it isn't your fault, but although I don't think that there is a more broad-minded person than I am in London, I'm just

old-fashioned enough to hate to see a Duke of Chatfield dancing with musical comedy at Mario's. I think the young men of the Victorian epoch managed their peccadilloes much more gracefully than you do."

"Got it in the neck," Eustace confided to the rest of them, as he took his departure. "I still say the boot's on the other leg. You people ought to stick to your own haunts."

"Eustace seemed jolly bad-tempered about it," Edna Halston observed, "but honestly I don't see what they have to complain about. I'm sure we're most tactful. There are two young men at that table I know exceedingly well — one of them sat out for two dances with me last night and I even let him hold my hand, and there he sits flirting shamelessly with that fascinating little Clara Framlin. I pretend not to see him, and I sha'n't take the slightest notice of it when we meet again. So long as we don't visit it on them, I don't see what they have to complain of."

"It's their consciences," Lady Betty declared.

"Men haven't any," Judy Franks sighed. "There's Gilbert Transome over there. We begged him to come to-night and he assured us that he was going out of town."

"Well, I want to dance again," Monica announced. "For some reason or other, there isn't such a crush just now. Bobby, you are my chosen partner for a waltz. Come along."

They stood up together and paused, suddenly conscious of a disturbance in front of Francis's table. A burly man, whose evening clothes were in some disorder, had pushed his way through the crowded room and was leaning over Francis towards Peggy Layton. Halston frowned as he recognised him.

"That's Burton. Used to be in my regiment," he whispered to Monica. "A bad lot, I am afraid, and a quarrelsome fellow. He's Peggy Layton's husband. They separated some time ago."

Monica felt the colour leave her cheeks.

"I do hope there isn't going to be trouble!" she exclaimed. "Can't you do something, Bobby?"

"Well, it's rather difficult to interfere," he pointed out. "However, I'll see."

He moved a little nearer. Burton was talking angrily to Peggy, who was distinctly terrified. Mario came hurrying up and touched Burton on the shoulder, but he thrust him on one side.

"I'm a member of this Club and I've a perfect right to come in," he insisted. "I want my wife. Are you ready to come along with me?"

"You know I'm not," Peggy answered. "I don't want to have anything to do with you."

He looked at her wickedly.

"If you think I'm going to have you knocking about town with any fellow who chooses to ask you to supper, you're wrong," he went on truculently. "Come along with me and talk it over, or there'll be trouble here."

"I wouldn't move a yard with you," Peggy Layton declared. "Can't some one get help or something?"

Francis rose slowly to his feet. He was as tall as the intruder, but he seemed slimmer than ever in his well-tailored clothes. Burton's dinner coat was crumpled, his shirt protruded and his black tie had wandered out of its place.

"I do not know who you are, sir," Francis said, "but you are making yourself offensive to one of my guests. I must ask you to withdraw."

"Withdraw be damned!" was the angry reply. "I

don't know who you are either, and don't want to. This lady is my wife, and I shall talk to her just as long as it pleases me."

Francis looked coldly past him.

"Mario," he directed, "this person must be removed."

Mario, who was a small man, hesitated. He touched Burton once more upon the shoulder.

"If you do not come away quietly, sir," he warned him, "I must send for the police."

Burton laughed hoarsely.

"Who cares for your police?" he jeered. "The police can't come between a man and his wife. Now then, Peggy."

He leaned forward and grabbed at her wrist. Without actually striking him, Francis held him away from the table. Burton's heavy face was suddenly full of an unholy satisfaction.

"So that's your game, is it?" he exclaimed. "Take that!"

He aimed a blow at Francis which the latter easily avoided.

"You had better go," Francis advised. "Mario has sent for assistance, and I shall not in any case permit you to interfere with any of my guests."

"You won't permit, you ——!"

He rushed at Francis whose right arm went out like a piston rod. For a moment Burton staggered. Then he collapsed upon the floor. There was a little murmur from the spectators; a scream from Peggy Layton. Francis, after a glance at the fallen man, resumed his seat. Two commissionaires came hurrying up the room. Still only half-conscious, Burton was hustled away. The music recommenced. A few of the people — Mon-

ica amongst them — danced. When the music stopped, however, she turned to her escort.

"I think I should like to go home," she announced. "I'm inclined to agree with Eustace. I do not think that this is the place for us."

"A scene like this might have happened anywhere," Halston pointed out.

"Somehow, it doesn't seem to me that it would have mattered so much anywhere else."

"Don't break up the party," Lady Betty begged.

"Everybody else is going on as usual," Halston urged.

Monica shrugged her shoulders. She was leaning back in her chair, fanning herself, still unnaturally pale but with a curious glitter in her eyes.

"Come and sit outside for a minute, then," she said to Halston. "I can't bear the atmosphere here."

They passed together across the crowded floor and out into the little entrance hall. There was a settee at the further end upon which Monica subsided.

"If you would really rather go home," her companion suggested, "I might take you now and come back again."

She shook her head.

"Leave me alone for a few minutes, please."

A police inspector was standing just inside the entrance door, talking to Mario. After a time the latter unwillingly turned away and entered the restaurant, reappearing in a few minutes, followed by Francis. The police inspector stepped forward and saluted, asked a few questions, the answers to which he took down in his pocketbook and withdrew. Francis would have passed Monica and Halston without notice, but the former sprang suddenly to her feet.

"Francis!" she exclaimed.

He paused at once and bowed. There was something indicative of strain in the attitude of both of them as they stood facing one another. Monica's tone was unusually cold.

"Francis, I wish to speak to you for a moment," she said. "Will you walk upstairs with me to the balcony?"

"Certainly," he assented coldly. "You will remember, however, that I have guests."

"We have all been made aware of that," she answered. "I shall not keep you for more than a minute. Wait for me, Bobby," she added, looking over her shoulder towards Halston.

The corner of the balcony which they entered was almost deserted. Monica suddenly turned to her companion. Her mood seemed to have changed; her tone was almost soft; the angry light had left her eyes.

"Francis," she remonstrated, "must you do these things?"

"It seems to me," he replied, "that I was somewhat the victim of circumstances."

"Such things mean little to you, I know," she went on, "but do you realise what it means to us who have been proud of the name to find the head of the House of Chatfield entertaining the lighter half of the stage at a night club, dancing publicly with these young women and becoming the central figure in a disreputable brawl?"

"I fear that I am something of an individualist," he answered stiffly. "I live the life I prefer, to please myself. The claims of my family, I admit, have not much weight."

"If I believed you, Francis," she said, "I suppose

that would be the end of it — but I don't; I don't believe you enjoy being with this class of people. I don't believe you enjoy brawling with a drunkard in public. I believe you have all the finer feelings we should love you to have, and for some reason or other you crush them down and turn a false front to the world. Francis, can no one help you? Must you go on like this?"

"I live the life I choose," was the doggedly persistent reply.

She shook her head.

"That is only half the truth," she declared, "and you know it. I didn't mean to speak to you again about this. If you knew how hard it was! And we are all pensioners on your bounty too, which makes it worse! If you were different, I shouldn't mind, but you aren't yourself with these people. You are not of their world. You try to force yourself into it, but you can't. Francis, I want nothing for myself — not even your kindness — nothing, even for my family — but don't waste your life. I'm not pleading with you because it hurts me personally to see you with these people, but because it is unjust to yourself, unworthy of you. I haven't a scrap of orthodox religion in me, Francis, but I do believe in the parable of the talents: the gifts entrusted to us are to be made the best of and not the worst."

Monica was her old self again; tender, human, with a note even of affection in her tone. Francis, save for one faint trembling of the lips, seemed to have drawn even further aloof.

"You are very kind," he said, "but you have a wrong conception of my character. The life which I lead pleases me. I have no intention of altering it."

"I am to give you up, then, as an insoluble enigma?" she asked wistfully.

"No enigma at all," he answered. "Just an ugly fact."

She turned away, a little crushed by a sense of failure, and descended the stairs alone to where Halston was waiting for her. They entered the restaurant and began to dance with scarcely a word. Up in the balcony Francis stood like a graven image, looking down upon the scene. His own table was by far the most uproarious. Eustace had taken his place and Peggy Layton, recovered from her fright, was leaning over him, rocking with laughter at a story which he had just been telling. Their table was littered with empty bottles and cigar ash. One young man with ruffled hair was lounging back in his place, his arm through his companion's. From where he stood he could hear Peggy's shrieks of laughter, and for a single moment he shrank back. A wave of mental nausea nearly drove him from the place. Then he recovered himself. A few minutes later he resumed his seat at the head of the table, an urbane if a somewhat silent host.

CHAPTER XXI

Chatfield Castle, on the night finally fixed upon for the celebrations, was ablaze with light from floor to ceiling. There were fairy lamps along the terrace and in the courtyard; the garage, stables and coach house were packed, and far down the avenue were ranged an amazing collection of farmers' carts, bicycles, *char-à-bancs* and motor cars of every description. Francis, Duke of Chatfield, was at home to the whole of his tenants and their friends and there was scarcely a farmer within thirty miles who was not partaking of his hospitality. It was hospitality absolutely without restrictions. Every room in the castle was thrown open. Amos, the head keeper, bent but vigorous at seventy, and Mr. Grimes, a farmer, and his brother-in-law, had found their way by Francis's special invitation into the great library, where, as in almost every other room, a plentiful supply of wines, cigars and refreshments of every description were set out upon an improvised sideboard. The two men were exchanging confidences.

"If one might make so bold now, Mr. Amos," his companion began, "you being a man of the world and a close observer of all sorts, what be the conclusions you've arrived at concerning the present Dook?"

"The Squire," Amos corrected doggedly.

"Squire if you maun call him so," Grimes conceded, "though Dook he is, which is a higher title."

"I'm agin you there, Mr. Grimes," Amos insisted,

"but on a night like this, when all is festivity and agreeableness, I'm not for holding out agin any man's views. The master I serve is the 'Squire' to me, and 'Squire' he maun be whether he be Marquis or Dook or any other title. And if you want my opinion of the present 'un, seeing as I'm sitting here drinking his champagne wine and smoking his cigars, and remembering the way he killed them partridges this afternoon — him who didn't know what a partridge drive was till the present saison — why, I say he's all right, Mr. Grimes. He's all that a gentleman should be."

"He's liberal-handed for sure," Grimes admitted, "but he's ways about him that surely do puzzle one."

"It is a family that's not without their weaknesses, Mr. Grimes," Amos observed.

"Surely that be so," the farmer agreed. "They do say up in London that he's the biggest spender of any Chatfield since the days of King George the third. I'm not like you, Mr. Amos, what's only been here for a matter of thirty years or so. I was born and bred here — sixty-two years have I lived at Chatfield — but such spending I never did see nor never shall again. Six hundred there were sat down to-night and one hundred of the gentry in the banqueting hall, and Mr. Johnson, he told me himself, that the same champagne was served to every one. Why, that ballroom has never been half full before, that I've seen, but to-night there's no moving in it."

"The Squire, he do be open-handed for sure," Amos acquiesced. "They say in London too that with his new four-in-hand, the racing stable he's starting, the young ladies he takes a fancy to and suchlike luxuries, he do make the money fly."

"And him brought up in a convent, as folks do

say," Grimes sighed — "leastways a monastery, which be the same thing, only for men."

"Powerful religious he maun be," Amos muttered.

"I'm not so sure that he ain't got rid of it," Grimes declared. "It be the same with all of us. When I was a little lad I was licked for to go to church and Sunday school. It kind of cured me for such diversions later on."

Francis and Monica entered through the open French windows. The two men rose at once to their feet but Francis waved them back into their places.

"Please don't disturb yourselves," he begged. "Lady Monica and I are only passing through."

"Amos, you're in disgrace," Monica told him. "You've a partner down in the ballroom looking everywhere for you."

The gamekeeper rose once more to his feet, suddenly conscience-stricken.

"That would be Mrs. Foules, for sure," he confided, "and I thank your ladyship for reminding me. Mrs. Foules do be a hot-tempered lady and I'm not wishing to give her cause of offence."

"You're being looked after all right, I hope," Francis enquired.

"Never better, your Grace," Grimes replied fervently. "Begging your Grace's pardon and Lady Monica's, I'll watch Mr. Amos on the floor."

The two men hastened off. Francis glanced around the room which was now empty.

"Why not rest here for a few minutes, Monica?" he suggested. "You must be tired."

She sank into an easy-chair.

"Sheer laziness," she confessed. "As a matter of fact, I don't think I ever felt less tired."

"You've been doing your duty nobly," he said, sitting down opposite her.

"Some of those dances were rather terrible," she admitted with a smile. "Especially the one-step with Mr. Smiles the blacksmith. That last waltz, though, made me feel quite young again. You really dance beautifully, Francis. It is amazing that you should have only just learnt."

"I am flattered," he murmured.

"Tell me, how does it seem to you to play the great landowner?" she asked. "Your ideas of entertaining are certainly princely."

"These things are not done on a small scale, I suppose," he replied carelessly.

"Nothing that you do seems to be done on a small scale, especially in London. You are bringing the grey hairs into Sir Stephen's head."

"I have some years of parsimony to make up for," he observed drily.

Monica was silent for a few moments. She was looking at the empty space above the chimney piece from which the picture of the late Duke had been removed.

"Well, it's no concern of mine, I suppose," she admitted, "especially as I and my family profit by your bountiful ideas."

Francis frowned.

"The various allowances of which you and your family are in receipt," he said stiffly, "are natural charges upon the estate. They come not from me but from the head of the house. There is nothing personal about them at all. I don't like them alluded to even by you, Monica."

She relapsed again into thoughtfulness.

"Do you know that I had quite a wonderful offer of marriage last week," she confided.

"Halston?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you marry him?"

"Because, although he's a dear fellow, he bores me to death. Only one thing makes me hesitate even for a second."

"And what is that?"

"I should no longer be a pensioner of yours."

"The word is ill-chosen," he replied harshly. "You are a Chatfield and an infinitesimal share of the Chatfield money comes to you automatically."

"One can't argue about the matter," she said. "I know how I feel. But, Francis."

"Well?"

"I decided not long ago," she continued, "that I would never speak to you on any serious subject again. If it were for my own sake I would not even now. But, do you know, I am more worried than ever about Eustace."

"About Eustace? Why, what is wrong with him?"

"You are too kind to him," she declared, "too good and generous altogether. Eustace is rather a weak young man and you treat him so wonderfully that he doesn't quite know where he is. You encourage him to live just as though his income were the same as yours. That isn't good for him, Francis."

"Isn't it?" he observed indifferently.

"Of course not. I know just what Dad is allowing him, and he must be spending heaps more. He can only do it by getting into debt — yours or somebody else's. Eustace, I'm afraid, so long as he finds money easy to get hold of, is one of those people who will

go on spending without thinking. It would be ever so much better for him if he had to work."

"I don't think you would find your views very popular with him."

"I dare say not, but it's the truth all the same. Then I think you're far too easy with Dad. I'm absolutely certain that he spends more than your very generous allowance. You seem to encourage both of them to think that the Chatfield coffers are theirs to dig into whenever they please."

"How long have you been saving up this scolding for me?" Francis asked.

"Don't consider it a scolding, please," she begged, "or I shall feel ashamed of myself. It's all because you're so generous and kind — Heavens! I'm engaged for this dance, and to Mr. Beldane, too, the chief tenant. Don't bother to come with me, Francis. I shall find him all right."

She hurried away. Francis closed the door after her and strolled back to his place. The echo of her last few words seemed to be drumming against his ears. A queer generosity, his! He stood gazing at that empty space on the wall with darkening face. The sound of approaching voices came almost as a relief. He turned away and stepped out on to the terrace, just as Lady Susan entered on Amos's arm, with Lord Henry and Sir Stephen following.

"Well, I think we've all done our duty pretty well," the latter observed. "A quiet whisky and soda and a rubber of bridge would be about the thing now."

Amos conducted Lady Susan to a seat and bowed stiffly.

"I am greatly obliged to your ladyship for the honour," he said.

Lady Susan smiled and brought out her knitting.

"Great fun, wasn't it, Amos? If your left knee didn't creak so much and I were a stone or two lighter, we should be a wonderful pair. Don't forget your dance with Lady Monica."

"I'll be keeping her in view, my lady," Amos replied as he left the room.

Sir Stephen helped himself to a drink and lit a cigarette.

"Well, these are very wonderful festivities," he declared.

"Wonderful indeed," Lord Henry assented. "How that young man," he went on earnestly, "brought up as he was, has learnt what I may call the higher arts of extravagance, I cannot imagine!"

"It is in the blood," Lady Susan sighed without looking up from her knitting.

"There have been spendthrift Chatfields, of course," Sir Stephen continued, with a note of gravity in his tone, "as there have been with most of our great families, but this present young man shows signs of outstripping any of the records of your house. I have already felt it my duty to comment on his rate of expenditure."

"How did he take it?" Lord Henry asked.

"I couldn't tell. He just laughed."

"He's an enigma, this young relative of ours," his uncle mused. "A complete enigma! Here's Ambrosius," he went on, as the door opened and Ambrosius and Monica appeared. Will you make us up for a rubber of bridge, Mr. Ambrosius?"

The newcomer shook his head regretfully.

"I am very much obliged but I would rather not," he said. "Bridge is not a favourite game of mine,

and our host has asked me to try and get up a table of poker."

"I hate poker," Monica exclaimed. "I hope Eustace won't play."

"I'm afraid that I cannot agree with you, Lady Monica," Ambrosius observed. "Poker is, in my estimation, the finest of all card games. There is scope for imagination, courage, memory and *sang froid*."

"It is also a game in which the longest purse must win," Sir Stephen commented drily.

There was the sound of voices upon the terrace and presently Francis and Felicia Dringe entered. Felicia, contrary to her usual custom, was wearing the costume almost of a professional dancer; a black shawl twisted around her body and a red rose in her hair. Monica watched her entrance with cold disapproval.

"How's the poker table getting on, Ambrosius?" Francis enquired. "Mrs. Dringe wants to play. Halston and Lady Betty are coming and Lord Eustace. That makes five with yourself. Is that enough?"

"Five is a very good number," Ambrosius assented.

Lady Susan replaced the knitting in her bag.

"I think, my dear," she said to her husband, "that as Francis would doubtless be glad of a few minutes' rest, it would be as well if we were to return to the ballroom. The people all appreciate it so much more if some of the family are present."

"You are very considerate," Francis observed, as he opened the door.

Monica drew him on one side, as he turned to rejoin the others.

"Francis," she begged, "I wish you'd keep Eustace out of the poker table."

"Why?"

"He loses his head so," she explained. "And he scarcely ever wins. I know he's been having a bad time lately. He simply cannot afford to lose any more."

Francis shrugged his shoulders.

"They will only play a small game," he assured her. "Besides, how can I keep him out? He is a guest and he asked particularly for a game."

"I hate to seem a spoilsport," Monica said doubtfully, "but ——"

She broke off abruptly as Eustace came hurriedly in. He was mopping his forehead and he helped himself at once to whisky and soda.

"I'm not too late, am I?" he asked. "I've been running round fat Mrs. Grimes in the lancers. Top-hole fellow that new second footman of yours, Francis. He did set the pace, I can tell you."

"You're sure you want to play, Eustace?" his host enquired. "I can easily find another to make up the table."

"Want to!" Eustace exclaimed, setting down his glass and lighting a cigarette. "I've been looking forward to it all the evening. What's it going to be, Ambrosius?"

"A pound, three pounds, five pounds ante. Anything you like. What do you say, Lady Betty?" he asked, as she entered the room with Halston.

"Oh, don't let's gamble," she begged. "A sovereign ante's quite enough."

"And five-pound rises?" Ambrosius suggested.

"No, just let's double," Lady Betty proposed. "Those five-pound rises from you rich men come expensive every time."

Ambrosius smiled covertly as he apportioned out the chips.

"Just as you like," he agreed. "Here are twenty pounds' worth for everybody."

They all took their places at the table. Francis seated himself by Monica's side on the couch.

"Well, as long as Eustace must play," his sister observed, "I'm glad he's got a moderate game."

"Moderate?" Francis repeated doubtfully. "I know very little about poker, but I should have thought under certain circumstances that the doubling game was more dangerous than any other."

"Not unless two colossal hands get against each other," Monica rejoined. "I don't think there's any one there would go in for fireworks unless Eustace lost his head."

"Mr. Ambrosius, they tell me, is a very fine gambler," Francis remarked.

"A fine gambler very seldom bets high on one hand. Francis, I'm sorry you had Felicia down here."

"Why?"

She smiled at him with uplifted eyebrows.

"Oh, the usual reason, I suppose. It isn't my business, I know, but she is a little blatant the way she runs after you."

"She's very good-natured. She danced three times for the tenantry this evening."

"I never doubted her good nature," Monica remarked drily. "All the same, I do wish that you weren't quite so friendly with her."

"I find her an amusing companion," Francis observed. "There are so many places it is difficult for a man to visit alone."

"Oh, I suppose, if you must have a companion of that sort, she's as good as any other. It is queer what mistakes one may make, Francis. I remember that first

day I saw you in England when you came here, I thought that the best thing that could happen to you would be to mix with other young men of your own age, like Eustace, and live their life for a time. And now I am sorry."

"Why?"

"Well, you have been through it all and it doesn't seem to have altered you," she explained, rather hesitatingly. "You have leaned over the flames but the furnace of life doesn't seem to have warmed even the tips of your fingers. You might just as well have remained that absorbed and rather attractive creature whom I remember on the ramparts at Pellini."

"In other words, I'm a disappointment."

"A shocking disappointment," she confessed. "You sow your wild oats too deliberately. You pour all the time the bitters of cynicism into the wine of living. I believe that I would rather after all that you had done as we feared and founded that monastery."

Eustace, who was momentarily out of the game, came over towards them.

"You two seem to be having a heart-to-heart talk," he observed.

"How is it going, Eustace?" his sister enquired, regarding him a trifle anxiously.

"So, so! A nice quiet game. I've won about thirty pounds up to now."

"Who's the loser?"

"Mr. Ambrosius."

"May he continue to be!" Monica prayed.

Francis looked at her curiously.

"Don't you like Mr. Ambrosius?" he asked.

"I haven't any feeling about him either way," she replied. "Ought I to have?"

"Good fellow, Ambrosius," Eustace declared. "Jolly useful too, at times."

"Are you in, Eustace?" some one asked from the table.

He returned to his place. Monica and Francis rose and strolled over to watch a hand. Ambrosius looked at his cards and then glanced round the table.

"Let me see," he murmured. "Every one in for two pounds, eh? I will make it four to play."

"I make it eight," Eustace said when it came to his turn.

Lady Betty studied her cards.

"What a nuisance," she complained. "I'll have to come in, though."

"Sixteen to play," Ambrosius announced.

"I'm in," Felicia assented.

"I'm not," Halston declared, throwing his cards into the middle of the table.

"Thirty-two to play," from Eustace.

Lady Betty sighed and threw in her cards.

"You are a pig, Eustace," she exclaimed. "I had a beautiful pair."

"I fear that I must make it sixty-four," Ambrosius observed.

Felicia also abandoned her hand.

"Beyond me," she sighed. "All the same, I hate being bluffed out."

"There is no bluff about this," Eustace assured her. "I am making it a hundred and twenty-eight."

"A hundred and twenty-eight pounds without drawing cards is quite a large amount," Ambrosius declared. "I must raise you again, Lord Eustace, but I shall not go to the limit. Two hundred pounds to play."

"Four hundred," Eustace retorted.

Lady Monica touched her host on the arm. She looked at him appealingly, but he only shook his head.

"We can't interfere," he assured her.

"Five hundred," Ambrosius announced.

Eustace looked at his cards once more, laid them down again and puffed vigorously at his cigar.

"A thousand pounds to play!"

Ambrosius shrugged his shoulders and bowed slightly.

"It is enough," he confessed. "How many cards, Lord Eustace?"

"None."

Ambrosius laid down the pack which he had been holding, looked through his own cards again, carefully selected one and threw it into the middle. Then he drew the one to which he was entitled from the top of the pack, and, without looking at it, placed it on the table face downward, a little distance away from his remaining four cards.

"Your bet, Lord Eustace," he reminded his antagonist.

"I make it two thousand pounds," Eustace proclaimed, with a quiver in his voice.

Ambrosius made a wry face. He tapped his hidden card for a moment with his forefinger as though about to look at it, but changed his mind.

"I shall raise you one thousand, making it three thousand."

Eustace hesitated for a moment. Of the two men, he was by far the most agitated. Greed and hope shone out of his face. Even his fingers twitched.

"I'll follow your example," he declared. "I'll raise you a thousand only. I make it four thousand pounds."

Ambrosius stroked his chin. He had the air of a man placed in a humorous predicament.

"As I am in some slight uncertainty as to my fifth card, Lord Eustace," he decided finally, "I will see you at four thousand pounds."

Eustace threw his hand triumphantly upon the table.

"We apparently both have fours," he exclaimed. "Mine are aces."

Ambrosius contemplated the four aces and shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid in any case," he confessed, "that I am beaten. For some reason or other, I felt like a little gamble. But see how tempting," he added, throwing his cards, one by one, upon the table. "I was dealt the two, three, four, five of spades. Your ace of spades reduces my chances. The six of spades is the only card that can save me. It is almost too much to hope for."

His fingers toyed with the fifth card, lifted it, and threw it face upwards upon the table. There was a moment's intense silence; then a chorus of exclamations. The card was the six of spades.

"A most amazing draw," Ambrosius admitted, leaning back in his chair. "A small royal flush."

Eustace sat for a moment speechless. The life seemed to die out of him. He stared at the fateful card with absolutely unseeing eyes. Then the murmurs of commiseration seemed to madden him. He sprang to his feet and struck the table with his clenched fist.

"It's a swindle!" he shouted. "I ought to have known better than to have played with a damned Greek!"

There was another silence almost as pregnant with sensation as the first. Then Ambrosius rose slowly to his feet. He presented almost a dignified appearance.

"Lord Eustace," he said, "you forget yourself."

Eustace turned wildly to the onlookers.

"You all saw!" he exclaimed. "You heard the betting. He must have known the next card. I tell you that he must have known. Who in the world would go up to a thousand pounds without drawing a card, on the two, three, four, five of a suit alone. The thing's ridiculous. What do you say, Halston?"

"I say that you're making an ass of yourself," Halston replied coldly. "I have known men go to a great deal of money on a double-ended straight flush. Certainly I am not surprised that Mr. Ambrosius found it worth a thousand pounds."

Eustace glared at him.

"All right, then," he continued violently, "if he was lunatic enough to do that, what about the betting afterwards? He never even looked at his fifth card. He went up to four thousand pounds and he never even looked to see whether he was backing a worthless hand. He must have known what that fifth card was."

The onlookers were beginning to recover from their stupor.

"I was sitting next Mr. Ambrosius," Felicia announced. "I saw him deal. I saw him afterwards announce that he was going to take one card, and take the top card in its due turn."

"And I shuffled the cards," Halston observed drily.

"My methods at poker may not appeal to you, Lord Eustace," Ambrosius said, "but they are my own, and if I choose to risk a few thousand pounds on the turn of a card it is my affair. It happens that I can afford to do so."

"There has been enough of this," Francis intervened. "Eustace, you are in the wrong. You had better admit it and offer your apologies to Mr. Ambrosius."

Eustace sat with folded arms, breathing heavily, speechless. Mr. Ambrosius calmly collected the chips from the players and redeemed them with money.

"Did you hear what I said, Eustace?" his cousin persisted.

"Four aces pat, and lose on them!" Eustace mumbled. "Was there ever such foul luck?"

"The fortune or the ill fortune of the game is another affair," Francis said curtly. "I require you to apologise to my guest, Mr. Ambrosius."

Eustace staggered to his feet. His fists were both clenched tightly. He looked around as though for sympathy, and found only disdain.

"Your cousin is quite right, Eustace," Halston declared. "It was a magnificent gamble on the part of Mr. Ambrosius. I doubt whether any one else whom I know would have had the pluck. He brought it off. Your accusations are simply ridiculous."

The young man, confronted with an entire lack of sympathy, had no longer any alternative. He drew himself up and faced the music.

"I apologise, Mr. Ambrosius," he said. "It was a maddening thing to lose with my hand and your draw. I hope you will remember that in excuse for anything which I may have said. I am sorry I lost my temper."

"I accept your apology with pleasure, Lord Eustace," Ambrosius replied. "The incident shall be forgotten. As regards the bet, we will call it off. It was, after all, only a game between friends."

"That is quite impossible," Francis interposed sternly.

"Impossible!" Eustace echoed without enthusiasm.

Ambrosius rose to his feet.

"I am quite at your disposal," he announced. "Pay

me then when it suits your convenience. You will excuse me, however, from continuing with the game."

The little company drifted towards the door. Francis laid his hand upon Ambrosius's arm.

"I will follow you all directly," he promised, turning to the others. "I want to have just a word with our friend here."

They trooped out. In a few moments the two men were alone. Francis closed the door.

"Ambrosius," he began, "listen to me. You know perfectly well what my wishes are with regard to Lord Eustace."

"I know what I understood them to be," was the cool reply. "I was to win as much money as I could from him."

"In addition to which," Francis went on, "you were to make it as easy as possible for him to borrow from you and as difficult as possible to repay."

"Well?"

"On the other hand, I have never suggested any actual act of knavery. If I believed that you were capable of such under my roof and under such conditions, our connection would be at an end. Was there any truth in Lord Eustace's charge?"

"None whatever," Ambrosius protested suavely. "How was it possible? You saw the play of the cards. I took what seemed to be a great risk, but what did it matter if I had lost? The young man already owes me money from which I could have deducted it, and every week he will lose more at my *chemie* parties."

"You did not manipulate the cards, then, in any way?" Francis persisted.

"Certainly not," Ambrosius assured him.

"I am glad to hear it. Remember my instructions

with regard to that young man and his father still hold good. What I wish brought about, however, must be brought about my own way. They must always have their chance if they are men enough to take it. You understand? "

"I understand perfectly."

"Without wishing in the least to interrupt this conversation," Felicia observed, looking in from the terrace window, "do you know, my dear host, that you haven't danced with me once? "

"Give me the pleasure now," Francis begged. "It is quite time I went back into the ballroom. Follow us as soon as you feel disposed, Ambrosius."

They left the room. Ambrosius watched their departure with imperturbable face. After a moment's pause he went to the sideboard, helped himself to a whisky and soda, and carried it back to the card table. Then he lit a cigarette and took up a pack of cards.

"The king of clubs," he said to himself.

He took what seemed to be the top card and threw it on the table. It was the king of clubs.

"The two of hearts."

He repeated the performance. The card which apparently came from the top of the pack was the two of hearts.

"The six of spades."

Again he held a card for a moment in the air, then threw it on to the table. It was the six of spades. He looked up to the ceiling and smiled blandly.

"So easy! " he murmured.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

Sir Stephen sipped his wine and set down the glass reverently.

"The 'seventy'!" he murmured.

"I am afraid I'm still not a judge of port," Francis confessed. "Johnson knew that you were coming and I left it to him."

"Johnson," the lawyer declared, "is a man of sound judgment."

The two men were dining alone at Chatfield House. Ten empty chairs were ranged around the long table in somewhat ghostly fashion. The lights were thrown upon the table only, for it was a warm June evening and the windows were opened out upon the square.

"It is ten months to-day," Sir Stephen reflected, "since you celebrated your home-coming at Chatfield Castle."

"Time flies," Francis observed.

"Especially time which is crowded with incident," his companion ventured. "Your life during those ten months has been very full of incident."

"I have made up for the lost years a little."

"Isn't it almost time," Sir Stephen suggested gravely, "that you called a halt?"

"Is this the beginning of my lecture?"

Sir Stephen finished the contents of his glass and refilled it with a steady hand.

"Your Grace," he reminded his host, "it is at your request that the few words I have to say are said at your own board and not at my office. Nevertheless I should not be doing my duty if they remained unsaid."

"This, I presume," Francis remarked, "is a continuation of the lecture which you commenced early one morning many months ago. Well, go ahead, Sir Stephen. I quite realise that it is your duty to remonstrate with me. I shall take another glass of port to fortify myself and listen in all due humility."

"When you succeeded to the property," the lawyer said, "the income from the land, the quarries, mines and suchlike, produced a sum of something like fifty thousand a year. Added to this there were funds, judiciously invested, amounting to between six and seven hundred thousand pounds. There was no mortgage upon the lands, and, in justice to your predecessors, I will say this, not even Lord Henry, during his period of control, at any time ever suggested the realisation of even a part of these investments. They were looked upon by him and his predecessors as funds belonging to no one personally but to the family, providing the necessary income for keeping up the position of one of England's great houses. Lord Henry was a very extravagant man. Nevertheless, somehow or other he avoided ever touching that money."

"Very praiseworthy of him, I'm sure," Francis murmured.

"Your Grace," Sir Stephen continued sternly, "the present condition of the finances of the House of Chatfield is deplorable. It seems to me to spell nothing less than ruin. Technically speaking, you are within

your rights in dispersing these funds and destroying the solid foundation upon which your house stands. As a matter of family honour, I venture to say to you that you are committing a sin."

Francis's lips curled in a smile of faint amusement. In the subdued light his face looked longer and paler than ever. Dissipation, if the prevalent rumours concerning him were true, had certainly not impaired his physique. He had still the lean, hard features of a man of careful life. His mouth was firm; his eyes brilliant.

"What," he asked, "is the extent of my enormity? I find figures so difficult to carry in my mind."

"In twelve months," the lawyer said, "you have spent, in addition to the whole income accruing to you, three hundred thousand pounds of the capital invested for the good of the house."

"Not bad for one year. You must remember, however, that a hundred thousand went to found that Roman Catholic College."

"That," Sir Stephen admitted, "was a contingency that we were prepared to face. The ugly fact remains that during twelve months you have spent three hundred and fifty thousand pounds and, if you will forgive my pointing it out, there are no signs at present of any diminution in your expenditure."

"I suppose I must be trying to strike an average," Francis observed. "You see, I lived for a great many years with two or three *lira* a week for pocket money — when it could be spared. I remember," he went on reminiscently, "quite well the time when I had positively no clothes. My father, in the course of one of his short visits, had left behind a few articles of attire. They were cut down for me, rather, I remem-

ber, to the amusement of my companions — the sons of the local innkeeper and general merchant. Perhaps that is what makes me rather extravagant at my tailor's nowadays."

"These things are trifles," Sir Stephen declared irritably.

"Trifles sometimes have a significance," Francis rejoined. "They point the way, you know. Still, proceed, please. I am here to listen to all that you have to say."

"I and my father before me," the lawyer went on, "and his uncle before that, have been the financial guardians of the House of Chatfield. That is why I have to speak to you in such very plain words. If you go on as you have been going, you will bring ruin upon the house and every one connected with your family. Why indulge, your Grace, in such reckless extravagance? Your income, although henceforth it will be reduced, is still an excellent one. Life is full of attractions for young men of your position, which do not necessarily involve the expenditure of these colossal sums of money. You have, they tell me, a natural aptitude for all sports; you can shoot, fish, hunt ——"

"Stop!" Francis interrupted. "I forgot to mention it before. I have decided to buy a yacht."

"My God!" the lawyer exclaimed, setting down the decanter with which he had been about to refill his glass. "A yacht!"

Francis nodded.

"I am very fond of the sea," he explained. "I thoroughly enjoyed that little voyage over from Calais. A beautifully fitted-up steam yacht of one's own would be, I think, a most desirable acquisition."

"Have you any idea," Sir Stephen asked solemnly,

" of the initial cost of a yacht, or of the cost of running it? "

" I fear not," Francis replied, carelessly vague. " I know that Lord Mountavon wants to sell his. Somewhere about thirty thousand pounds is all he wants for it."

" You are at the present moment," Sir Stephen announced, keeping calm with an effort, " overdrawn at the bank, notwithstanding your inroads into capital, to the extent of something like fourteen thousand pounds. May I ask how you propose to pay thirty thousand pounds for a yacht? "

Francis finished his single glass of port and lit a cigarette.

" You still have some of what you call the ' funds ',"
he observed. " You have only spent about half of them. Have another glass of wine, Sir Stephen."

The lawyer had forgotten all about the " seventy " port. He pushed the decanter away from him.

" I sought this interview with you," he said, " to try and point out the enormity of your realising these sums of money, collected by your ancestors for the sole purpose of augmenting the income of your house. I came here to protest against your having touched the principal of these for any purpose whatever. You have listened to what I have had to say and you now tell me that you propose to make a still further encroachment upon those funds to provide yourself with yet another form of luxury."

" I gather that you disapprove of my contemplated purchase," Francis sighed.

Sir Stephen rose to his feet. A certain sense of dignity had come to his aid.

" Your Grace," he observed coldly, " does not, I see,

intend to discuss seriously the matter which brought me here."

Francis also rose. There was a sudden smile upon his lips, entirely alien to the Chatfield family. He laid his hand upon his guest's shoulder.

"My dear Sir Stephen," he begged, "forgive me. I know so well that you are doing what you conceive to be your duty as an honourable man. I will consider all that you have said, but I will not discuss it further. As for the yacht — well, we will let that stand over for the present. One more glass of wine, Sir Stephen. See, I will throw away my cigarette and join you. Afterwards you shall go as soon as you like. I have another visitor arriving to whom you and most of my relatives seem to have taken a great dislike."

The lawyer found himself back in his place. Francis himself filled his glass — an altered Francis; a suave and courteous host, talking to him as they sipped the smooth, velvety wine, with its wonderful bouquet, of the crudeness of Italian vintages, listening with interest to Sir Stephen's account of the laying down of the port for the Chatfield cellars during the last hundred years. There was another atmosphere in the room. When the lawyer stood up to take his leave half an hour later he felt that he had been charmingly entertained according to the best traditions of the house he worshipped. It was not until he sat in his taxi on his way to the club, that he realised the complete failure of his mission.

Francis remained alone at the head of that ghostly table. There were some faint signs of the departing day in the hushed sounds outside: taxis were less frequent, a sedate gloom was settling down upon the

square; the single light on the dining table seemed to burn more clearly. He sat in his high-backed chair, struggling with a somewhat confused state of thought. There were moments when the world which lay behind — the white-washed villa on the hillside with its straight grove of cypresses, its untidy garden, its poverty-stricken air, the brooding monastery below, the details of his daily life, sordid yet lightened by flashes of indomitable enthusiasm — seemed like a dream world in which all the participants — himself included — were puppets. And then these nearer days — the man who had sat at his table a few minutes ago, Lady Monica, beautiful as ever but with that faint question always in her eyes, living a life in its way as impetuous and ungoverned as his own, Ambrosius, Felicia Dringe, the whole crowd of them. Perhaps it was they who were unreal, they who were the puppets, himself who dreamed. — Johnson's quiet voice behind him brought him suddenly back to the present.

"Mrs. Dringe has called to see your Grace," he announced. "I have shown her into the library."

Francis nodded and, rising to his feet, crossed the hall and entered the library. Felicia had thrown herself into one of the great easy-chairs. She had turned out the light above her head, and for the moment her outline was lost. Her white arms and bosom gleamed like separate fragments of marble; her eyes, too, shone as he moved towards her. He raised her fingers to his lips.

"My dear Felicia," he murmured, "you have come at a wonderful time. My lawyer, in the garb of a prophet of woe, has been dining with me. You will have some coffee?"

He rang the bell — needlessly, for Johnson was al-

ready arranging a coffee equipage at Felicia's side. Another man entered with liqueurs. In a further corner of the room, underneath a green lamp, Mr. Moss was at work. Felicia waved her hand impatiently.

"Send everyone away, please, Francis," she begged. "I want to talk to you."

Francis dismissed the servants and crossed the room to where Mr. Moss was seated. He stood for a moment with his hand upon the librarian's shoulder, looking down at his work.

"Capital, Moss!" he pronounced. "You won't forget, though, to enter the Arsella manuscript as reputed. Personally, I think it is a fifteenth-century copy."

Mr. Moss's weak mouth was suddenly tightened.

"I should like an opportunity of discussing this matter with your Grace," he said. "I take the liberty of holding a contrary opinion."

"We will have it out again to-morrow," Francis promised. "In the meantime do you mind giving us half an hour? It seems too bad to turn you out, but this is the coolest room in the house. Take a walk round the square or drive round the park. You spend too much time huddled up at that desk."

Mr. Moss rose reluctantly to his feet.

"Will an hour be sufficient, your Grace?" he asked.

"Ample," Francis assured him. . . .

"You propose to get rid of me quickly, then," Felicia observed, as Francis rejoined her.

He smiled.

"I happened to remember," he explained, "that you are dancing at eleven o'clock to-night before the great ones of the world. You are on the way there now, I suppose."

She nodded.

"Quite right," she admitted. "I didn't think you'd remember."

"The new car pleases you?"

"The new car is wonderful," she answered without enthusiasm.

"Money?" he enquired lightly. "I am at your service."

She sprang suddenly from the depths of her chair; a slim, quivering figure, her beautiful lips distorted for a moment with the passion which blazed also from her eyes.

"Money!" she cried. "Francis, I hate the day that I let you settle with Mr. Ambrosius for me. I hate the day I first made you pay those bills. It was disgraceful! I am humiliated!"

"My dear Felicia!" he protested.

The only reason for her silence seemed to be an absolute lack of all powers of speech. She stood before him, rapidly clenching and unclenching her hands. There were no tears in her eyes but the faint lines underneath seemed to grow darker. Her bosom was rising and falling with volcanic quickness.

"I am sorry," she said, after a time. "I meant to come here quite quietly, just to say a few words to you and ask you a single question. I know you hate melodrama. Believe me, this isn't anything of the sort. So many people in this world have spoken of my temperament — well — you see I really did lose my self-control for a moment. I am quite calm now. Please sit down at my side."

He obeyed her. She rested her hand upon his shoulder and leaned towards him.

"Francis," she asked, "will you kiss me?"

He looked at her with a faintly protesting smile.

"Felicia," he reminded her warningly.

"Oh, yes, I know," she rejoined. "It's outside the bargain. I am quite aware of that. Well, I've come to tell you that I've had enough of the bargain."

"I am sorry," he answered.

"Is it to continue? Is there any hope, any chance of a change?"

"Frankly, no," he replied.

She struggled with herself; apparently in vain, for her head sank into her clasped hands, her shoulders shook. Francis rose to his feet and stood moodily a few yards off.

"Our bargain was a perfectly simple one," he said coldly. "I cannot see what cause of complaint you have against me."

She grew very still and cold. Her hands left the front of her face and fell into her lap with a little gesture of despair.

"You are right," she admitted. "I have no cause of complaint against you. It is simply that you have humiliated me more than I have ever been humiliated in my life. I deserve it, I suppose. I looked upon our bargain as ridiculous, but I never dreamed that you meant to keep it. I was even conceited enough to believe," she added, "that there was no man living who would have kept it."

"You are taking a distorted view of this matter," he assured her.

"Am I?" she answered. "Very well, I will run no risk of making a mistake. You have paid all my bills; you have given me the pearls I am wearing, the motor car which brought me to the door and anything else that it has entered into my head to ask for. I have

waited for some sign from you, and waited in vain. Is there anything you desire from me in return?"

"Your society. That was the bargain."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

She unclasped her necklace and tossed the pearls upon the table. From the door she looked back at him.

"The car shall be at your garage to-morrow," she promised. "The money I cannot repay you — you have lost that. Never mind! I have lost something, too. Francis!"

She suddenly weakened. Her arms crept out towards him. He seemed to stiffen visibly.

"Felicia," he told her gravely, "I cannot alter the terms of our bargain. You will make me very unhappy, though, if you leave me with these," he added, taking the necklace into his hand.

She looked at it for a moment with distended eyes. Then she began to laugh, not altogether pleasantly.

"I don't think I am squeamish," she said, "and I am not supposed to be moral, but I feel like the righteous heroine of the melodrama when I think of wearing your pearls. They burn my neck, Francis — gewgaws of shame, you know, and that sort of thing. Keep them until you have learned one little secret about women. They take greedily, perhaps; they love also to give."

The door was pushed gently open from the outside. Eustace made his appearance.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, looking from one to the other. "Not interrupting anything, am I? Not putting my foot in it, as usual?"

"Not in the least," Felicia assured him drily. "A most tactful entrance, I should call it. You can see

me to my car if you will — mine, at least, until to-morrow. Good night, Francis!"

"Good night, Felicia!"

Eustace performed his duties and returned hastily to the library. Francis was still standing where he had left him.

"Frightfully sorry if I butted in or anything," he apologised. "You told me to come along, you know, and remind you of Peggy's supper party to-night. The whole crowd are going. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing at all."

"You are coming to the party?"

"Of course."

"And you haven't forgotten about Ascot to-morrow?"

"Certainly not. The cars will be here at half-past nine."

"Good old Francis!" Eustace murmured. "Gad! I believe that's the 'thirty-eight' brandy. Mind if I have a glass?"

"Finish the bottle if you like."

"What's that in your hand?" Eustace asked, as the lamplight flashed on the clasps of the necklace.

Francis shrugged his shoulders and slipped it into his pocket.

"A birthday present for Peggy, perhaps," he answered.

CHAPTER II

Monica, in a gown of biscuit-coloured muslin, which she had brought home from Paris only the week before, was wandering restlessly about the library at Chatfield House. In a distant corner she came upon Mr. Moss, seated at a small desk, busy cataloguing.

"Why, good morning, Mr. Moss!" she exclaimed. "Still here, then?"

"Still here, your ladyship," the librarian replied, "and very much busier than I used to be."

She glanced at him curiously; a dried up, passionless-looking creature, unchanged, it seemed to her, since she was old enough to remember his existence.

"Busier?" she repeated. "What are you doing? Making out a fresh catalogue?"

Mr. Moss smiled.

"His Grace is an enthusiastic collector," he confided. "Our fourteenth-century manuscripts now are almost unique. Then ——"

"Does the Duke really take an interest in these things?" she interrupted eagerly.

So far as Mr. Moss was capable of exhibiting any emotion whatever, he showed surprise at her question.

"His Grace is quite a scholar," he said. "His modern Latin is far superior to my own and his judgment at least as good."

"How on earth he finds time for it, I can't imagine," Monica observed.

"His Grace sits up late and rises early."

She looked across at the clock.

"Does he?" she remarked. "Well, he's not particularly early this morning. He asked us to be here at half-past nine punctually. We're all going down to Ascot together."

"His Grace is generally very punctual."

Monica strolled back again towards the lower end of the room where Sir Stephen and Lady Betty were seated.

"We haven't come on the wrong day or anything, have we?" she speculated. "It's a quarter to ten already, and Johnson seemed scarcely to know what to do with us when we arrived. I am going to ring the bell and ask him how long my beloved cousin means to keep us waiting."

She leaned forward and pressed the button. Johnson entered almost at once. He was obviously ill at ease.

"You told his Grace that we were waiting, I suppose, Johnson?"

The man hesitated for a moment. Then he told the truth.

"It is very unfortunate, my lady," he confessed, "but I do not know where to find his Grace."

"Eh? What's that?" Sir Stephen interposed. "Not know where to find him! What do you mean, Johnson?"

"His Grace did not return last night, Sir Stephen."

"Not return?" Monica repeated.

"Not return?" Sir Stephen echoed. "The devil! Do you mean to say that he is not in the house now?"

"I have not seen him since eleven o'clock last night, sir," Johnson admitted.

"And you have heard nothing from him?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

"Where was he going?" Monica enquired.

"He didn't say, my lady. I heard him talking with Lord Eustace about a supper party given by the Hilarity Company at Mario's restaurant. — Ah, kindly excuse me for a moment, your ladyship."

The telephone bell was ringing. Johnson took up the receiver and listened with some agitation.

"Yes — Yes," he said. "Sir Stephen is here now, your Grace, also Lady Monica and Lady Betty. I will tell him at once, your Grace."

He laid down the receiver, and stood for a minute looking ruefully around.

"Well?" Sir Stephen demanded. "Any news?"

"It was his Grace speaking, sir," Johnson acknowledged.

"Well? Where is he?"

"At Vine Street Police Court, sir."

"Good God! What's he doing there?" Sir Stephen groaned.

"I gathered, sir, that he has spent the night in custody," Johnson replied. "He said that I was to fetch you at once and beg you to rush round. His case is just coming on and he might be requiring bail."

"His case?" Sir Stephen gasped.

"Bail?" Monica cried.

"His Grace was not very coherent," Johnson confessed. "I gathered that he had been in some trouble with a policeman last night."

The lawyer snatched up his hat and stick.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "I'll take one of the cars and hurry around at once. You girls had better wait here. Don't breathe a word of this to any one. We may be able to hush the thing up. Trouble with a policeman! The Duke of Chatfield!"

He hurried out, followed by Johnson. Lady Betty leaned back in her chair and laughed softly.

"Do you remember saying, Monica — down at Chatfield, when Francis gave his great fête to the tenantry — that you believed he was a saint at heart? What about it now?"

"I don't understand," Monica admitted. "I can't imagine Francis being mixed up in any sort of a vulgar brawl."

"Can't you?" Lady Betty observed drily. "I am not at all sure, Monica, that we any of us understand that young man. He's fair game for all the second-class journalists now. Do you ever see the *London Post?*"

"Never."

"Oh, they get to know things, those people," Lady Betty continued. "Only last week they asked, under the heading 'Things we want to know', whether a certain young nobleman who has recently added lustre to Bohemian society is seriously contemplating a return to the monastery, and whether, if he does go back, the young ladies from the Hilarity Theatre will take the veil?"

"You don't pay any attention to the trash you see in those sort of papers, do you?" Monica asked scornfully.

"There's generally some truth in them," Lady Betty replied. "Even Rupert grins when I mention his name. Besides, I see him myself driving little Peggy Layton, or one of those girls, two or three mornings a week in the park. I don't think he need be quite so brazen about it. As to Felicia Dringe — well, she seems to have deserted every one of her other admirers and devoted herself to him!"

Monica had turned a little pale.

"I can't understand it," she repeated.

"Are you by way of being in love with him, Monica?" her friend enquired.

"Don't be absurd!" was the irritable reply. "He's only barely civil to any of us, and he deliberately avoids me. I don't see him once a month."

"You seem to take his peccadilloes very much to heart," Lady Betty remarked.

"Of course I do," Monica retorted. "After all, he's the head of the family. I hate to think of these women running after him. I wish he'd chuck them all and marry some one decent."

"Wouldn't that affect you people financially?"

"We couldn't be worse off," Monica replied bitterly. "He makes quite a handsome allowance to the family and we spend twice as much. We're on the road to ruin, anyhow. If 'Laughing Sally' doesn't win to-day I, personally, shall come the most complete and utter cropper any human being could imagine."

"What an idiot you are, Monica!" Lady Betty yawned. "Why do you bet at all?"

"My dear," Monica explained, "I have a reputation to keep up. I am supposed to be the smartest and the wickedest unmarried girl in London and I have to do all these things. Then I have been having the foulest luck. Do you know that I lost over seventeen hundred pounds at *chemin de fer* last Thursday?"

"Wherever do you play for such stakes?" Lady Betty asked.

"Oh, at some miserable little place in Sackville Street that Mr. Ambrosius took Eustace and me to over a year ago. The maddening part of it is that every one else seems to win."

"No one can win in the long run at those places."

"I suppose not," Monica assented. "Yet one must do something. I'm tired of being made love to by men I don't care a snap of my finger about, and the men who do amuse one — well, they expect a good deal nowadays."

"What about Mr. Ambrosius? He follows you everywhere like a shadow, and they say that he's a multimillionaire."

Monica smiled scornfully.

"Well, there's always Mr. Ambrosius," she admitted. "I think I should go off my head, though, if he ever suggested such a thing. It would be like entering for the divorce stakes before one was married. What on earth ——"

She broke off in her speech. The door was suddenly opened and Francis entered, followed by Johnson. He stopped short as he recognised his two visitors. They both stared at him in amazement. He was still in evening clothes; his trousers and coat were covered with mud, the silk muffler which he was in the act of unwinding disclosed the fact that he had no tie and that his shirt was stained and crumpled. He was paler even than usual, but his eyes were almost fiercely bright.

"I was trying to tell your Grace that the young ladies were here," Johnson began.

"Entirely my fault," Francis acknowledged. "I wanted to speak to Moss. Monica, Lady Betty, I offer you both my apologies."

"Pray don't trouble," Monica begged coolly, looking at him from head to foot. "I wouldn't have missed this for anything. Can we have an unexpurgated account of the proceedings which led to your — somewhat deplorable condition?"

"It is all owing to the unreasonable policemen of

this country," he complained. "In Italy if you kick a policeman he apologises. If you kick him twice he runs away. The policeman who annoyed me early this morning did not run away. I'm inclined to wish that he had."

"Abandoning the subject for a moment," Lady Betty intervened; "has it occurred to you that you promised to motor us down to Ascot this morning?"

"The cars are at the door now," he replied. "If you will excuse me for a quarter of an hour I shall be at your service. I promise you we shall be there in plenty of time. Have I your permission ——"

"Yes, hurry!" Monica interrupted.

He left the room with a little bow of farewell. The two girls exchanged glances.

"'The Rake's Progress'," Lady Betty remarked. "He's doing pretty well at it."

"And yet he puzzles me," Monica confessed. "Dissipation generally leaves some trace behind. He stood there in that morning sunlight, disreputable, battered, unclean, and yet somehow or other he looked more of a saint than ever."

"After all I am beginning to wonder whether you are not in love with this good-for-nothing cousin of yours," Lady Betty observed.

"On the contrary, I hate him," Monica announced.

"Why?"

"Because I can't understand him."

Her friend leaned back in her chair and laughed.

"Don't be silly. Men are all pretty well the same. The only difference between them is that some are more blatant than others.

Monica shook her head.

"Men are not all the same," she insisted. "Francis

is unlike any one I ever met before. There is something sinister about his misdeeds — something which seems to me almost deliberate about his dissipations. One could fancy that he had a serious reason for steeping himself in every form of excess — for indulging in exploits like this one."

"Just seeing life, my dear," Lady Betty declared. "I hope he won't be long."

The door was suddenly opened. Sir Stephen reappeared.

"Has he got back?" he asked breathlessly.

"Ten minutes ago," Monica replied. "He's changing now. Tell us about it."

"A most disreputable affair," he groaned. "It appears that the police arrested one of a party of roisterers coming out of a flat in the West End at three o'clock this morning. Francis interfered and promised to take the offender home. The policeman, however, refused to let him go and Francis knocked him down."

"Knocked him down?" Lady Betty repeated.

"And two or three others as well. They say it took five of them to get him to Vine Street. He was fined ten pounds and the magistrate's remarks were most caustic. The midday papers will be out before we get on the Course."

"It must have been a beautiful scrap," Monica remarked coolly.

Sir Stephen frowned.

"My dear Lady Monica," he expostulated, "it was a most disgraceful affair. The worst of it is that nothing we can do will keep the case out of the papers. You will see the name of the Duke of Chatfield on all the placards to-night. It is all very well to take these things lightly, but there is a terrible side to it all.

This young man is bringing dishonour upon a great family. He seems to be doing it, too, deliberately."

Monica was silent for a moment. She had the air of one brought suddenly face to face with an unexpected truth. She rose to her feet.

"Deliberately!" she repeated. "Sir Stephen, I believe that you are right. I believe that I am beginning to understand. — Heavens, is this Eustace?"

CHAPTER III

"HULLO, everybody!" Eustace exclaimed weakly, after a somewhat furtive entrance. "What's wrong, eh? You are all looking pretty solemn."

From the depths of their easy-chairs, Monica, Lady Betty and Sir Stephen eyed the newcomer in silence. Eustace laid his silk hat and glasses upon the table, yawned and rang the bell. He was dressed with great care but his eyes were redder than ever and his complexion unusually pasty.

"Do you know about Francis?" Monica asked him sternly.

"Know about him?" Eustace groaned. "I was there."

Johnson appeared in answer to the ring. Eustace turned towards him.

"Get me a brandy and soda and half a dozen aspirins, if his Grace has any," he ordered. "If not, send round to the chemist's."

Johnson bowed and withdrew. Sir Stephen waited until the door was closed.

"How did Francis get led into this?" he demanded severely.

"Get led into it?" Eustace repeated, with a note of indignation in his tone. "Well, that beats the band! Fancy leading Francis anywhere. Why, when he gets going, there isn't one of us could touch him."

"But surely he's not quarrelsome as a rule?" Monica asked.

"He doesn't stop to quarrel," Eustace replied.

"One would think that he had been brought up in a prize-fighting academy. The very sight of a policeman after dinner seems to affect him like a red rag does a bull. It was a terrible mix-up, but the way he bowled them over last night was a dream."

"Disgusting!" Sir Stephen exclaimed.

Johnson reappeared with a salver and Eustace helped himself liberally.

"Thank heaven for that!" he sighed, as he set down the tumbler empty. "Has his Grace had any breakfast, Johnson?"

"No, my lord," the man answered. "He has only been home a few minutes."

"Better leave the brandy and soda on the sideboard."

"Certainly, your lordship. His Grace, however, never takes anything in the morning."

"I wish to God I had taken a little less last night," Eustace lamented, holding his head. "I've had three aspirins already."

The door was quietly opened and Francis entered. He was looking his usual self and was dressed with the greatest precision. Eustace surveyed him in wonder.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "How do you do it, old chap? You look — my God, you look as though you had gone to bed at eleven o'clock last night and had a cold bath this morning!"

"Well, I've had the cold bath, all right," Francis admitted, smiling.

"But you can't have had any breakfast," Monica remonstrated.

"Breakfast!" he replied. "I had a cup of coffee in my bath. Why this interest in my diet?"

"A young man who has been out all night," Monica began severely —

"Pardon me, nothing of the sort," Francis interrupted. "I had a good three hours' sleep in a most comfortable cell."

"There's some brandy and soda on the sideboard," Eustace pointed out. "I told Johnson to leave it in case you felt like some."

"Thanks, but I never touch it. If you're all ready, we will start at once. If Lady Betty and Sir Stephen and Eustace will take the first car, you and I will follow them, Monica."

They moved down the hall together. Monica laid her hand upon her cousin's arm.

"Francis," she said, impulsively, "I am glad we're going together. I want just one serious word with you."

"No lectures," he insisted. "I can't stand any more. I've had a terrible twenty-four hours."

"Nothing of the sort," she assured him. "I'm far too wrapped up in my own affairs to worry about your peccadilloes. It's about 'Laughing Sally'. You really think she's certain to win?"

"I wouldn't go so far as that."

"But you have declared to win with her?" she reminded him anxiously.

"Yes, I've declared to win with her," he admitted, readily. "There are other good horses in the race, though."

"I can't see that there is one to touch her," Monica exclaimed, "if she's fit. Your second string, 'Grey Lady', is the only dark horse."

"'Grey Lady' is a very useful animal," Francis remarked.

"But you have declared to win with 'Laughing Sally'," Monica reminded him again with increased

anxiety. "There isn't anything wrong with the mare, is there?"

"Nothing that I know of. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for no particular reason, except that Eustace and every one I've met lately seems to think there's a sort of uneasy feeling about with regard to the race. Captain Halston told me yesterday that he was completely mystified. 'Laughing Sally' on paper ought to be at two to one. As a matter of fact you can get sevens anywhere. And 'Grey Lady', who ought to be at a hundred to one after your declaration, keeps creeping up in the betting."

"Why are you so interested?" he asked. "Have you been having a little flutter?"

"A little flutter!" Monica rejoined. "I have backed 'Laughing Sally' for all I have in the world."

He glanced into her face. There was the shadow of a desperate look there which he had noticed once or twice lately.

"Monica, if I were you," he began —

She suddenly clutched at his arm. They were standing beneath the great portico of Chatfield House, watching the first car, which was on the point of starting. A powerful two-seater had just arrived and a small man in a long coat had descended and was making his way towards them.

"It's Sidney Platt, your jockey," she pointed out breathlessly. "Do see what he wants."

"If you will get into the car I will follow you directly," Francis suggested. — "What are you doing here, Platt," he went on, turning away. "Surely you ought to be down on the Course?"

"I am on my way down now, your Grace," the jockey answered. "I shall be there in plenty of time. I took

the liberty of calling in here for a private word in case I didn't see your Grace before the race."

"No bad news from the stables, I hope?" Monica asked, leaning out of the car.

"No bad news at all, my lady," was the somewhat dubious reply. "If I could speak to your Grace entirely in private."

"Follow me, then," Francis directed.

He turned round and led the way into a small waiting room just inside the hall.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded, as soon as he had closed the door.

"I want my riding instructions from your Grace's own lips," the man said. "I see that you have declared to win with 'Laughing Sally'."

"Well, isn't that what we decided six weeks ago?" Francis replied. "You remember the result of the trial."

"Things have changed since then, your Grace," the jockey declared earnestly. "What's wrong with 'Laughing Sally' there isn't a vet in the country could tell you. The mare seems all right, but she's lost her pace. 'Grey Lady' will win by streets, your Grace, if I ride her all out. I'll hold her back all I can, but it'll be a tough job."

"Do I understand," Francis asked, after a moment's pause, "that you believe you could win with 'Grey Lady' if you tried?"

"It's a dead cert, your Grace."

"Then, if you can win, do so," Francis directed. "You know my offer — whoever wins, riding one of my horses, gets a thousand pounds. You can back 'Grey Lady' for a hundred pounds on my account, if you think you've a chance."

There was a gleam of cupidity in the jockey's eyes. He was still perturbed, however.

"Your Grace will forgive my pointing out," he said, "that there may be some trouble with the stewards and with the public if 'Grey Lady' should win. She stands at a hundred to one after your declaration and I don't think the public have backed her for a shilling."

"The public are in the same box as I am, then," Francis replied, with a little shrug of the shoulders. "I have not a penny myself on the race."

"Your Grace has not backed 'Laughing Sally'?"

"Nor 'Grey Lady'," Francis assured him, "although I don't quite see what business it is of yours."

"I beg your Grace's pardon. I take it then, finally, I am to ride 'Grey Lady' to win if I can."

"By all means."

"If it comes off," the jockey said, "I shall swear that the mare bolted with me. I may do something with her bit. Your Grace fully realises, though," he added, pausing with his hand upon the door, "that if you declare to win with one horse and win with another, there will be trouble."

"I shall welcome it," Francis assured him.

"Any news?" Monica enquired, as he rejoined her and they started off.

"Nothing special."

"'Laughing Sally's' all right, I hope."

"Platt doesn't know much about her. He's riding 'Grey Lady'."

"Of course."

She subsided into her corner. They bowled smoothly along through Hammersmith, on to Brentford, and at last out into the open country. Monica leaned lazily forward, examining the little trifles of tortoise-shell and

gilt in the case opposite to her. She drew out a memorandum book and looked at it. Suddenly her eyes flashed. She held it towards him.

"What does this mean?" she asked coldly. "'F. D.' Whose initials are these?"

"Felicia Dringe's, I suppose," he answered.

"You dare to tell me that we are driving in her car?"

He took up the tube and spoke to the chauffeur.

"It seems," he explained to Monica, "that this is a car which Felicia returned to me last night. I gave it to her, it is true, but it is no longer hers. I am exceedingly sorry that I brought it out. You see, I have two others exactly the same model, and those were the two cars I ordered for to-day. This one being identically the same, I suppose my head man didn't think that it mattered. I offer you my apologies."

She leaned over, took the cluster of little articles, one by one from their places, and threw them into the hedge which they were passing. He watched her with an amused smile. She turned round and faced him.

"Now I feel better," she confessed. "Kindly tell me what this means. Have you quarrelled with Felicia?"

"Our friendship appears to have come to an end," he acknowledged. "You could scarcely call it a quarrel."

"Then you mean to say that she actually returned you the car you had given her?"

"She did, also a few other trifles."

Monica sighed.

"It is amazing," she declared. "I always thought Felicia was rather a greedy woman. She must have been very fond of you. — Oh, Francis, Francis," she

pleaded, "why don't you turn over a new leaf and behave nicely?"

She leaned towards him, and he was suddenly conscious of a surge of that feeling for which Felicia had prayed in vain. The memory of that drive home from Chatfield Castle thrilled him. Monica's eyes seemed to be growing larger and softer; her delightful mouth was already quivering.

"Francis, why don't you behave like the dear you really are?" she begged.

They shot forward to pass another car. Lord Henry, pompous and dignified, with the Chatfield look upon his face at which Monica so often laughed, waved his hand genially. Lady Susan leaned forward and smiled. The sight of the two together was obviously pleasing to them. Francis laughed heartily as they took their place once more in the middle of the road.

"Why that unpleasant sound?" Monica asked ruefully.

"I was thinking of your father's face," he replied, "when he takes up the evening papers and reads that the Duke of Chatfield has been fined ten pounds and costs at Vine Street Police Station. 'Disorderly conduct and assault upon the police' they called it. They generously waived the matter of drunkenness."

She snatched her hand away from his.

"What a brute you are, Francis!" she exclaimed.

CHAPTER IV

Francis, who had watched the race from the rails, found himself a few moments afterwards in the midst of a wildly shouting and gesticulating crowd. The whole thing seemed unreal — a sudden picture flashed across the brain and withdrawn: "Grey Lady", her jockey reeling in his saddle, bent forward over her neck, three lengths ahead; the dramatic silence; the roar of disappointed voices. He made his way to a table at the back of the grand stand, ordered some strawberries from an officious waiter and prepared for the storm. Eustace, wandering aimlessly about, was the first to discover him. He came hurrying up, swinging his race glasses, his hat on the back of his head, his face ghastly pale.

"Good God, Francis!" he exclaimed. "You know?"

"Of course," his cousin assented. "Have some strawberries."

"Damn the strawberries," Eustace rejoined heartily. "Do you realise what has happened?"

"Absolutely. 'Grey Lady' has won by some two or three lengths. 'Laughing Sally' finished in the ruck, I should think. Platt was lucky to sit the mare — lost her bit or something, didn't she?"

"Look here," Eustace groaned. "It's all very well for you to sit there eating strawberries, Francis, but do you realise that I am ruined? There'll be the devil to pay over the whole business. You declare to win with 'Laughing Sally'. We all back her, and 'Grey Lady' makes her look like a cab horse."

"Most unfortunate," Francis murmured. "I can assure you that in the only trial I've seen between them, 'Grey Lady' was hopelessly beaten."

"Look here, old chap," Eustace asked huskily, "as between pals — and I shall need a pal before the week's out — how much did you back 'Grey Lady' for?"

"Not a penny."

"You mean to tell me that you were on 'Laughing Sally'?"

"I have no bet on the race," Francis declared.

"You didn't back either of your own horses?"

"Why should I? Betting amuses the public; it doesn't amuse me. The racing is the only thing I care for."

"But how on earth can you make a racing stable pay without betting?" Eustace demanded incredulously.

"I don't try," Francis admitted. "I find that mine costs me a great deal of money."

Eustace took off his hat and mopped his forehead.

"Look here, old chap," he said, "I'm not blaming you for what's happened to-day, although I warn you that there are many who will — still, it was your geegee who upset the applecart. Do you think that you could possibly help me?"

"Why should I?" Francis enquired. "I do not bet myself. Why should you? Besides, I make your father a very good allowance."

"I know, and I'm jolly grateful and all that. But, Francis, this race has absolutely done me in the eye — laid me out flat. I must touch at least a couple of thou before Monday."

"I'm short of ready money myself," was the frank acknowledgment.

"I don't wonder at it, the way you live. Still, you

can raise it all right. If you don't help me, Francis, I shall be in Queer Street — the colonies and a pick-ax, or a monkey and barrel organ in Piccadilly. You don't need to part with a copper — a word to Ambrosius will do the trick."

"Very well," Francis acquiesced. "I'll telephone to him directly I get back."

Eustace drew a long breath of relief.

"My God, you're a brick!" he declared. "I sha'n't forget it, I can promise you. Here's the governor and old Laveringham bearing down on us. I'm off. See you later!"

Lord Henry and his companion, who were engaged in earnest conversation, paused a few yards from where Francis was still seated. The former was, for him, almost agitated.

"You've never met Chatfield, have you?" he asked. "Come and have a word with him quietly about this little matter."

Lord Laveringham shook his head.

"I think," he decided, "that I had better not meet the young man for the present. As a member of the Jockey Club, I may have to do so in another capacity before many hours are past."

"But my dear Laveringham," his companion began —

Laveringham made his escape. Lord Henry approached his nephew with gloomy countenance and portentous manner.

"I see you're indulging in a little reflection, Francis," he observed solemnly. "A most extraordinary race!"

"I thought it rather a good one," Francis replied. "I never could have believed that I possessed a horse

in my stable with such action as 'Grey Lady' showed during the last few strides. Seems to me she went better doing the wild prairie stunt!"

Lord Henry glanced cautiously around.

"It seems an odd thing to say, Francis, but I hope that you're not a heavy winner over the race."

"A winner! I had no bet at all."

His uncle stared at the young man for a moment in blank astonishment.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Come back to the box, there's a good fellow. I want to talk to you quietly. There are too many people moving about here."

Francis rose to his feet and they made their way towards the Stand. The owner of "Grey Lady" was recognised by one or two of the promenaders and the tone of their remarks was distinctly unfriendly. Once a slight hiss was heard. Lord Henry tightened his grasp upon his nephew's arm.

"You must expect to find yourself unpopular, Francis," he warned him.

"I must bear with the fact," was the dry response. "I thought that the essence of racing as a sport was that the best horse should win."

They found the box empty, a fact which seemed to afford Lord Henry some relief. He carefully closed the door.

"It appears likely, Francis," he said, "that we shall be alone for a few minutes. Let me take the opportunity of warning you that there will probably be a great deal of ill-feeling about this *contretemps*."

Francis sank into a comfortable wicker chair and accepted the glass of wine which his uncle poured out, although he showed no signs of drinking its contents.

Lord Henry, on the other hand, refilled the glass which he had promptly emptied.

"Let us exchange a few plain words," he suggested, seating himself opposite to his nephew and drawing his chair back so as to be out of sight of the crowds below. "You see, my dear fellow, you are already a great surprise to the world. You were, if you will forgive my saying so, rather an austere person when you came over here to — er — to assume your rightful position. People were expecting very different things of you. You have certainly surprised them and us."

"In what way?" Francis enquired.

"I am your elder by a generation," his uncle went on, "and your father's brother, and I may therefore speak to you frankly. You have earned the reputation of being a libertine, a gambler, and a spendthrift. You are openly seen with women of doubtful reputation in places which men of our order prefer, as a rule, to keep for their own womenkind. Last night, or rather early this morning, you made a disgraceful appearance in the police court, and nine tenths of the people we see passing back and forth below, who are not talking about this miserable racing fiasco, are probably talking about the fight between the 'Duke and the Policeman'."

"A very good fight, too, if the fellow hadn't been so slow," Francis commented, with a reminiscent smile.

"Pardon me, but that sort of thing is altogether out of date," Lord Henry said stiffly. "In the time of the late Georges a greater latitude was shown as regards these affairs. To-day I am bound to tell you that they are considered bad form."

"I appear to be in disgrace all round," Francis remarked.

"You are and you deserve to be," his uncle replied, with the courage engendered by that second glass of champagne. "These are days when it has become a shibboleth to keep up appearances. You can be the biggest blackguard imaginable provided you don't force the knowledge of your iniquities upon the world. If you do, you must take the consequences."

"You interest me exceedingly," the delinquent assured him suavely.

Lord Henry frowned. His manner had attained almost to dignity.

"Interest you!" he repeated with some heat. "That was scarcely my intention. This is not the place for a serious discussion of a lengthy nature, but all the same I cannot refrain from telling you, in connection with this latest episode, that your deportment is bringing shame and dishonour upon an ancient name."

"The name of Chatfield!" Francis murmured interrogatively. "By the bye — forgive me if I am wrong — but is it not true that you are a director of the Comet Assurance Company?"

"I fail to see the relevance of your enquiry," Lord Henry rejoined, a little taken aback, "but it is unfortunately a fact. I was deceived by the nature of the operations carried on by that concern."

"And Hoppner's Private Banking Company?"

"I was positively forced upon the Board," Lord Henry declared uneasily. "A considerable number of the shareholders, however, have acquitted the directors of all responsibility."

"Then there was the Leadenhall Cold Storage Company?"

"You are remarkably well informed," Lord Henry observed, with a frown. "I will grant at once that I

have not been well advised in my commercial activities. At the same time, I might remind you that I was introduced to each one of these disastrous affairs by your friend and protégé, Mr. Ambrosius."

"In any case you will admit that your commercial activities, as you call them, have not added any particular lustre to the name of Chatfield," Francis persisted.

"I, at any rate, have kept the name out of the police court," his uncle reminded him.

"Perhaps you were a little nearer the Old Bailey," Francis ventured to suggest.

Lord Henry rose to his feet.

"Even our relationship, Francis," he protested with anger, "is insufficient warrant for such insinuations."

"My dear uncle, I am attempting no insinuations. I am dealing in plain facts. You will scarcely deny that you have been director of a great many companies whose sole intention has been to fleece the public. I have not heard that even after the nature of their operations was discovered, you returned the money which you had received as director's fees."

"Such a course would be most unusual," was the irritable rejoinder.

Francis smiled inscrutably.

"Really! Well, I will not dispute such matters with you. In return, I suggest that you view my occasional appearances in the police court with greater equanimity. Perhaps ——"

The door was suddenly opened. Monica entered, with Ambrosius hovering in the background.

"Here's the villain of the play drinking champagne while his victims discuss suicide!" she exclaimed lightly.

"I am afraid that you are disappointed, Monica," Francis remarked, rising to his feet.

"Oh, no, quite pleased! It is always a joy to meet an entirely new situation, isn't it? I am like half a dozen other of your friends who are going about thirsting for your blood — broke to the world. You'd better go and look for Mummie, Dad," she went on, turning to her father, "and take Mr. Ambrosius with you. I want to talk to Francis."

The two men left the box together, Francis watching their departure with a faint smile of amusement. Monica took her father's chair.

"Quite a relief to find you here," she confided. "I imagined the multitude seeking to tear you limb from limb."

"So did your father, apparently. He found me sitting on the lawn and insisted on my taking cover. May I give you some wine?"

"Nothing at all, thanks, unless you have a little prussic acid about," Monica replied bitterly.

"As bad as that?"

"As bad as that."

"You're a little out of date, you know," he reminded her. "Veronal is the popular refuge."

"Beast!" she exclaimed. "I really believe you are the hardest person I ever knew."

"My bringing up, perhaps," he murmured.

"Do you admire me, Francis?" she asked, a little abruptly.

"I think that you are very beautiful."

"Pooh! I'm much more than that. I have what all these other women try to copy; what the *Tatler*, when it published my last photograph, called 'the psychic influence of unanalysable attraction'."

"I agree with the *Tatler*."

"Then why don't I attract you?"

"I have never said that you do not."

"You prove it. You prefer long-legged women who dance like spiders and who think that they are artists because they prefer zigzags to curves. It isn't wholesome, you know, Francis."

"Please go on."

"I don't object to your *penchant* for the little musical-comedy ladies nearly so much," she continued, "only I don't think they look any nicer in your Rolls-Royce than I should, and I can't think that they'd be much more amusing. One must tire of shibboleth and honey."

"I shall never dare to ask you to drive with me now," he sighed. "Your father has just been explaining to me what a particularly black sheep I am. After to-day I should think that his opinions would probably be reflected by a great many other people."

Monica leaned forward for a moment to look at the numbers for the next race. Then she settled herself once more comfortably in her chair.

"Of course," she assented, "if it amuses you to go about getting drunk, knocking policemen down, spending the night in police cells and winning races with the wrong horses, you must expect it in time to affect your popularity. On the other hand, you probably don't care what people think of you. What you are aiming at in life, heaven only knows! I often stop to wonder. As a rake, you always seem to me rather a poseur."

"You are very astute, dear cousin."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know why I sit here bandying words with

you, Francis," she said. "I really have something very serious to say."

He sat quite still, waiting. She leaned forward confidentially.

"Francis!"

There was a knock at the door. She gave a little gesture of despair.

"Just as I had summoned up all my courage!" she exclaimed, throwing herself back in her chair.

CHAPTER V

A SMALL crowd of people trooped into the box, amongst them Lady Betty, her brother Lord Rupert Bremner, Captain Halston and his sister. Conversation for the first few moments lacked spontaneity. It was hard to speak of the day's tragedy with Francis present. Lady Betty ventured to sympathise with him.

"We are all so very sorry for you," she said. "I'm afraid you're terribly disappointed."

"I don't know that I am," Francis replied. "It was at least a very unusual race. I couldn't see very well, but they told me that Platt could do nothing else but hang on, and couldn't have stopped 'Grey Lady' if he'd wanted to."

"'Unusual' is a very good word for the race," Captain Halston remarked a little coldly. "Dashed unpleasant thing to have your second string win — especially under the circumstances. — Monica, you gave us the slip in the most barefaced way in the paddock. We've been looking for you everywhere."

"I was seized upon by the omnipotent Mr. Ambrosius," she declared. "What a power wealth is! We're all afraid to be rude to him because he's a millionaire. He held up his finger and I came meekly along to look for strawberries which I didn't want, just because a stroke of his pen would make me a rich woman."

"Insufferable bounder!" Halston muttered, accepting a glass of wine, which Eustace was pouring out. "I can't imagine why you're so civil to him."

"My dear man," Monica confided, "any one with money possesses an extraordinary fascination for me. I don't suppose he'd give me a sovereign if I asked for it, except for value received, but the mere thought that he could sit down and write me a cheque for every penny I owe in the world without being any the poorer for it endows him with a sort of unholy attraction. I find myself shivering with excitement when he speaks to me. I can see his pudgy fingers gripping a gold fountain pen. One can't be rude to such a man."

"I have an idea that I shall be some day," Halston confessed gloomily.

"I sympathise with Monica," Lady Betty declared. "To even think of being rude to a millionaire is to show yourself entirely out of sympathy with the spirit of the times."

"I didn't see anything of you in the Paddock, Chatfield," Lord Rupert observed. "Have you had Platt's report yet?"

Francis shook his head.

"I suppose I ought to have gone round," he said. "I rather thought Molden, my trainer, would have turned up."

"They're off!" Eustace exclaimed suddenly.

Every one watched the race a little languidly. The favourite had just cantered past the winning post, ten lengths ahead of the next horse, when there was a knock at the door. A messenger entered.

"Is the Duke of Chatfield here?" he enquired.

"He is," Francis answered, rising to his feet. "What do you want?"

"Lord Laveringham's compliments and he would be glad if your Grace would step into the stewards' room for a few minutes."

There was an ominous silence. Francis stretched out his hand for his hat. Lord Henry bustled in.

"My dear Francis!" he exclaimed fussily. "I have just left Laveringham. It is as I feared. The stewards wish to see you."

"I have this moment received a message from them," Francis told him.

"If my support is of any assistance, you can count upon it," Lord Henry declared. "This matter touches the honour of our house. If you wish it I will accompany you."

"Thanks, I'd rather go alone," Francis replied. "I don't know exactly what is likely to happen to me, but if I'm allowed to, I'll come back here."

He passed out, to all appearance entirely unconcerned. His uncle looked around with a little groan.

"This is terrible! Really terrible!" he exclaimed.

"Why?" Monica asked. "Francis has done nothing dishonourable."

"He declared to win with the wrong horse," Captain Halston pointed out, "and that isn't a very popular proceeding either with the stewards or the public."

"You can never make a moral certainty of any race," Monica argued. "Besides, it was obvious that Platt couldn't have stopped 'Grey Lady', however much he'd tried."

"My dear, you know very little about it," her father intervened testily. "We must remember, though, that whatever happens it is our duty to stick to Francis."

"Naturally — as we all live on his bounty," Monica assented under her breath.

"A most improper way of describing the situation," Lord Henry protested. "Francis only makes those allowances to his next of kin which are usual and

decent. In return for them, however, I admit that it is our duty to give him our countenance. That is why I offered to accompany him to the stewards' room."

Sir Stephen knocked at the door and entered.

"Have you heard the news?" he demanded. "I understand that Chatfield is up before the stewards."

"They sent here for him," Lord Henry acquiesced gloomily.

"Has it occurred to any of you people that Francis didn't back 'Grey Lady' for a penny?" Monica asked.

Lord Rupert scratched his chin.

"So I understand," he murmured.

"He told me so," Eustace declared.

"Pretty hard thing to prove," was Halston's dry comment.

The door was opened cautiously and Mr. Ambrosius entered.

"I hope I am not in the way," he said. "I was deeply concerned to hear that the Duke had been sent for by the stewards."

"My nephew has certainly been sent for," Lord Henry acknowledged stiffly. "We trust, however, that nothing will come of it."

"There's the devil of a lot of feeling about," Halston observed. "They say that the bookies have snaffled a cool million out of the British public. There wasn't a bob on 'Grey Lady', naturally. That is, if Chatfield really didn't back her."

"You're not suggesting that Francis told you a falsehood, I hope?" Monica asked, with an angry gleam in her eyes.

"Certainly not," Halston replied hastily. "On the other hand, it will be rather difficult to make people understand the situation."

"I am an ignoramus in racing matters," Sir Stephen confessed, "but the whole affair seems most unfortunate."

"Deplorable!" Lord Henry sighed. "I certainly never imagined that the head of our house, that any Chatfield, would ever be called upon to explain the running of one of his horses."

"I can't see that Francis is to blame at all," Monica persisted. "He declared to win according to his trainer's reports. I don't see what else he could have done."

"There are all sorts of rumours flying about," Halston ventured.

Lord Rupert nodded.

"One chap I saw just now in the paddock," he confided, "was telling every one for a fact that there had been two or three later trials of which no notice whatever was taken."

"This is a very terrible day!" Lord Henry muttered. "It started badly. The sight of that early edition was like a nightmare."

"What price the Sunday papers!" Eustace enquired dismally.

"And to think that this young man was torn from what is called a 'Holy Life' to assume the position of head of our house," his father groaned.

The door was opened a little abruptly and Francis reëntered. He appeared still entirely unruffled and met their enquiring gazes with a faintly enigmatic smile.

"Well?" Lord Henry exclaimed eagerly.

"Did they lay it across you?" Eustace demanded breathlessly.

"Tell us about it at once, Francis," Monica enjoined.

Francis took a cigarette from the box upon the table and lit it.

"Well, there isn't much to tell," he said. "I felt rather like an errant member of the congregation of some Scotch kirk."

"What did they decide?" his uncle asked.

"They didn't seem able to come to any decision," was the indifferent reply. "They seemed thunderstruck when I told them that I hadn't backed 'Grey Lady' for a penny — that I had never, in fact, made a bet in my life. They asked me a lot of questions about later trials, but I told them I hadn't been to Newmarket for two months. The Marquis didn't say so, but it was obvious that he didn't believe me."

"For heaven's sake, tell us their verdict," Lord Henry begged feverishly.

"Well, they whispered together for about five minutes and then they told me very stiffly that a further investigation of the matter would be necessary. Pending the result of this enquiry, they suggested that I abandon racing as a form of recreation."

There was a moment's breathless silence. Eustace was the only one who dared put the thing into words.

"Warned off, by God!" he muttered.

"A Chatfield!" his father moaned.

Francis had moved to the front of the box with the intention of speaking to Monica. Suddenly a significant sound from below attracted his attention. He stopped short and looked down. A little crowd of people had gathered at the back of the seats and there was an ominous chorus of hissing.

"There's no doubt about my unpopularity," he observed. "I think, perhaps, I'd better relieve you of my company."

He turned away. Monica rose promptly to her feet.

"Let us all go home," she suggested. "We know just where the cars are and I certainly don't want any more racing to-day."

"Not such a bad idea," Eustace agreed.

"I should prefer," Francis objected, "to find my way back alone. I will leave the cars."

"You will do nothing of the sort," Monica declared, laying her hand upon his arm. "I came with you and I am going back with you."

They trooped out on to the corridor. A little posse of policemen were lined up there. The sergeant saluted Lord Henry.

"We've instructions to escort your party, my lord," he announced. "There's an ugly crowd hanging around the gates."

For the first time Francis showed signs of real feeling. He freed himself from Monica's restraining arm.

"Please allow me to find my own way out," he begged. "I am perfectly well able to take care of myself and there is not the slightest necessity to involve you others in any annoyance."

She laughed softly. The light of battle was in her eyes.

"Touched at last, my imperturbable cousin!" she exclaimed. "Nothing would induce me to desert you. If there's any fun going, I mean to see it. I suggest, though, that our escort spreads out a little. To march on either side is simply to draw attention to us."

"Her ladyship is quite right," the sergeant agreed. "We'll keep in the background as much as possible."

After all nothing happened. Monica dawdled down the path and stood outside the gate talking unconcernedly to Francis whilst the car with a policeman

on the box to ensure its rapid progress was brought round. At the last moment Lord Henry and Eustace joined them. She made a little grimace.

"I hoped I was going to have the black sheep of the family to myself," she complained. "Must you two really come?"

The car started off just as a crowd of loiterers discovered the identity of its occupants. There were a few shouts. The police stopped one man who seemed inclined to follow it.

"I think," Lord Henry declared, leaning back in his place, "that since we are here, we will remain."

CHAPTER VI

Francis had appropriated to his own use, and furnished in bachelor fashion, a very pleasant suite upon the first floor of Chatfield House, a little cut off from the main part of the building. He made his way there immediately upon his return from Ascot, ordered a whisky and soda from his valet and rang the bell for Mr. Moss. The librarian appeared after a few minutes' delay.

"Well, Mr. Moss?" Francis enquired.

"Your Grace was quite right," Mr. Moss admitted. "I have consulted all the authorities and I have been round to the British Museum to see Mr. Terrett, who is our greatest authority about Rappelli. The manuscript which is being offered to-morrow is without doubt a copy. I am exceedingly glad that your Grace pointed out the variations in the text. I am afraid that I myself should have accepted it as genuine."

Francis nodded.

"I'm glad you're convinced," he said. "Did you bring up the engagement book?"

"I did, your Grace."

"I know I'm supposed to be dining at Storeham House," Francis continued, "but wait a moment — have you any idea, Mr. Moss, what it means to be 'warned off the turf'?"

"I believe, your Grace, that it implies dishonesty in the running of horses."

"Just as I imagined," Francis acknowledged. "I have been 'warned off the turf', Mr. Moss, by the

stewards at Ascot to-day, and I spent last night in a police cell."

"Dear me, your Grace!" Mr. Moss remarked equably. "I was not aware of that."

"I was subsequently fined ten pounds and costs. I sent for you, Mr. Moss, to ask your advice. Under the circumstances, do you think I had better dine at Storeham House? I understand that Royalty will be present."

The librarian considered the matter for a moment gravely.

"Under the circumstances, your Grace, I should not attend the dinner. With your permission, I will send a note of excuse."

"Capital!" Francis assented, with an air of relief. "I shall dine up here alone. You might let me have the Florentine Missal to look through and also the 'Abelard and Heloise' that Sotherby's sent round. By the bye, do you happen to have seen the evening papers?"

"I never read the papers, your Grace," Mr. Moss confessed.

"A pity! They're full of me this evening."

"I shall perhaps read one going home in the Tube. There is nothing else I can send up from the library?"

"Send me a copy of Walter Pater's 'Renaissance'," Francis directed — "the vellum-bound edition you were showing me the other day. That's all, I think. Good night, Moss."

"I wish your Grace good night," Mr. Moss replied.

Francis bathed and changed in very leisurely fashion. Afterwards he dined in the small salon of his suite — a very frugal meal, with which he drank water and one glass of port afterwards. Coffee was served to him in

the den adjoining; a very perfect little bachelor's room, hung with tapestries which he had bought himself at Christie's, and furnished with a certain sedate mediævalism which gave an ascetic atmosphere to a room which was still entirely comfortable. He was engrossed in studying the crabbed text of his Florentine Missal when Sir Stephen Dobelle was announced. Francis laid down the volume with reluctance.

"Come in, Sir Stephen," he invited. "I hardly expected to see any of you race-goers this evening."

"I scarcely hoped to find you at home," was the lawyer's admission, as he seated himself in the chair to which Francis pointed.

"I am here as a matter of policy," the latter confided. "I was engaged to dine at Storeham House, but Mr. Moss thought that I had better not go."

"Mr. Moss was without doubt right," Sir Stephen pronounced gravely.

"No coffee?" Francis continued. "You'll find cigars on the table at your right, also liqueurs and a little light literature if you have a fancy for it. You will discover all you don't know about me if you will just glance through those papers. I think it is in the top one there that I am described as 'the latest degenerate of an aristocracy which a more robust proletariat would have conducted to the guillotine a century ago'."

"Thank you," Sir Stephen replied, lighting his cigar and ignoring the pile of journals to which his host had pointed, "the newspapers won't tell me what I want to know about you."

"What do you want to know?"

"Exactly what the hell you're after."

Francis raised his eyebrows.

"Dear me! Very strong language for a family lawyer!"

"There is no language strong enough to express my feelings. May I speak to you plainly for a few minutes?"

"I can see you mean to whether I give you permission or not. Go ahead, then!"

"Francis, Duke of Chatfield," Sir Stephen began solemnly, "I am responsible for digging you out of that monastery and bringing you back to England. I claim the right to ask a few plain questions."

"I am not sure that I admit the right," Francis replied, "but ask them."

"I have finished remonstrating with you as regards your extravagance. The course you are pursuing is a wicked and a selfish one, but if you choose to destroy the financial resources of your family, neither I nor any one else can stop you."

"Your acknowledgment of that fact is so much to the good," Francis murmured. "Pray continue."

"I have an even more serious charge to bring against you," the lawyer went on. "You start by treating the members of your family ——"

"My family!" Francis interrupted, flinching.

"Your family without a doubt," Sir Stephen insisted firmly. "You start by treating them, as I was about to say, with absurd generosity. You have actually encouraged them, individually and as a family, to live far beyond their means. They must owe you or some one large sums of money. On the other hand, you absolutely refuse to sign the quittance absolving them from responsibility for the money of yours spent during their occupancy of Chatfield."

"So far," Francis acknowledged, "I find your con-

versation interesting. Your survey of the situation is luminous and exact. Pray continue."

"With your permission I intend to do so. You deliberately affect tastes which I do not believe that you possess. You pose as a dissipated roué and I believe that at heart you're an ascetic. The whole business of last night was a pantomime. I do not believe that you were drunk at all. You are a very skilful boxer, they tell me, but I do not believe that you found the slightest pleasure in assaulting that policeman."

"You're entirely wrong," Francis assured him. "The fellow had ginger hair and I hate a policeman with ginger hair."

"Then as regards the fiasco of to-day," Sir Stephen continued. "I honestly believe that you had studied the whole situation, worked it out so as to keep within the letter of the law, and brought it to a climax, solely for the sake of some malicious pleasure you found in seeing the members of your family lose their money, and bringing the name you bear into ill-repute. What is the ultimate end of it all? What does it mean?"

"It means," Francis confessed, "that you are beginning to bore me. Just a little prolix, aren't you?"

Sir Stephen rose to his feet and helped himself to a whisky and soda. He set it down by his side and leaned over towards his host.

"I will endeavour to be more direct," he said. "I charge you with preserving a malicious and destructive attitude towards every member of your family with whom you have been brought into contact. You have discouraged Eustace from taking up any work, and looked on tolerantly, even approvingly, when you knew quite well he has been gambling far beyond his means. You introduced Mr. Ambrosius to your uncle and you

never said a word to stop his joining the Board of those rotten companies which Mr. Ambrosius pretended to finance. You have carefully encouraged Lady Monica in her extravagance, and at the same time you are doing your best in every direction and in every manner to bring into contempt and disrepute the name you bear. Just what does it mean? There's nothing prolix about that question. Give me a plain answer."

"Why should I?" Francis asked coolly. "You are not my guardian. I am responsible to no one."

"I am not your guardian," Sir Stephen admitted, "but you are here to-day instead of in the monastery at Pellini entirely through my efforts."

Francis reflected for a moment.

"You have a certain claim," he acknowledged. "I will answer your question on one condition."

"Condition? Well?"

"Secrecy until I give the word."

"I consent," Sir Stephen declared. "The cards should be on the table between you and me at any rate."

There was a curious change in Francis's demeanour. His somewhat cynical aloofness had been obviously a mood. He rose to his feet and moved restlessly about the room. His eyes were filled with slowly burning fires. He had become more human, though. His tone, when he spoke, was more natural.

"Listen," he said, coming to a sudden standstill before his visitor's chair. "I want to condense. I could talk for hours. I want to put it all into minutes. I will go back to when I begin to remember — I was living in a villa, cut off from the world — a small, plainly furnished habitation, with a woman who was an angel — my mother — also cut off from the world. She was young, she was beautiful, she was fond of

pleasure, of life and of gaiety, of music, and the sight of beautiful things. None of these natural diversions fell to her lot. She was guarded as though she were in prison. Every now and then, generally arriving by night, skulking in the gardens for a few days, unwilling even to accompany my mother to the little town near which we lived, terrified of any chance recognition, came a dour, drab man — my father. Granted that he spared my mother the one wrong you and the world at first believed, he made her life a living hell. For the sake of his family, his accursed name, he hid her out of the sunshine, he kept her hidden, she died hidden. She was sweet and beautiful, and, although she was poor, she was of as gentle a race as his. But the ogre of his great family stalked by his side, and for the sake of it he murdered my mother, body and soul. I heard her plead. I saw her despair. I saw her die. There is, thank God, more of her blood than his in my veins — the passionate, Italian, justice-loving blood — and since the day when I followed her coffin to the graveyard I have lived but with one thought — to pay back upon his own people some part of the misery he heaped upon her. I was like a mad being with that great overmastering longing. Then, at Confession, I had to part with the truth. There was one escape and they forced it upon me. They saved me from being an ordinary murderer — I am grateful to them for that. I took the vows. Then you came. You think that I should have come to this hateful country and borne this hateful name for any purpose save one? I loathe the place, I loathe my surroundings, I loathe the life I lead. But all the time things march to my purpose. Now you know."

"Yes, I know," Sir Stephen said gravely.

Francis threw himself back in his chair. He had the air of a man from whom something vital had escaped. He seemed weary, yet still filled with smouldering excitement.

"I'll try and be as frank with you as you have been with me," his companion promised. "Your father was a selfish pig. Others found it out besides you. He treated your mother disgracefully. Well, he's dead."

"He's dead, but the others aren't."

"The others have no place in the show."

"Haven't they?" Francis questioned drily. "There's a marble monument over my father's grave. There you may find all his quarterings, all the proud boastings of his titles, his long list of names. In life he was obsessed with the pride of race. In death he perpetuated it. Well, it's his name I am besmirching. If he doesn't know it and can't feel it, I'm sorry — but I believe he can and does."

"It amounts to this, then," Sir Stephen summed up, "you're planning the ruin of the House of Chatfield."

"Precisely," Francis acquiesced. "And I don't think you will stop me."

"I should not try," was the grave assurance.

"Why not?"

"Because you will fail," Sir Stephen declared so earnestly that there was a tremor, almost a passion in his tone. "Because I believe that all great names — everything that is meant to endure — possess a soul. You can drag the name of the family — your own, by the bye — from the police court to the criminal court, from the criminal court to the gallows, if you will. You may bring disgrace and ruin upon every present member of the family, and even then you will have done nothing. There are many more Chatfields living.

Another will take the name, purified maybe with suffering. The next generation of the family will atone for everything. Long after you and I are gone, there will be Chatfields moving through the pages of history, living down the memory of one degenerate generation. You are following a poor will-o'-the-wisp for a young man."

There was for the moment a new expression in Francis's face — an expression almost of fear. His visitor's words were ominous; instinct with a certain ugly truth. It was one generation alone which he could strike — a flick of the whip against a block of granite. Sir Stephen, like a wise man, made no effort to press his advantage. He rose instead to his feet.

"You will do me the justice to observe," he said, "that I have made no sort of appeal to you. I will only venture upon a word now. You will do no good to any one living or dead by travelling along your present path. Give it up. The past is finished — these people are responsible for nothing. Be a normal man. Marry. Take to yourself some of the happiness which your mother missed. Believe me that would please her most."

"The honey of happiness would turn to gall in my heart," Francis declared bitterly. "You mean well, Sir Stephen. You're an honest man."

"I wish to heaven that I could make you a sensible one."

Francis shook his head. His finger was upon the bell.

"We have reached an anticlimax. You have inveigled me into making the situation clear. Nothing that you could say to me or I to you would make any difference."

Sir Stephen moved towards the door.

"You have qualities," he remarked quietly. "I shall live in hopes that you may come to regard this matter in its true light."

Francis threw himself into his chair.

"Tell Mr. Moss, if he is still there, to bring me round the Rappelli manuscripts himself," he directed the servant who was showing Sir Stephen out.

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Moss, who presently appeared, was very voluble concerning his new treasures. It was soon apparent to him, however, that his patron, although interested, was not giving him his undivided attention. It was in a measure a relief to both of them when Johnson announced another visitor.

"You can show Mr. Ambrosius up," Francis directed. "I am afraid we shall have to postpone our discussion, Mr. Moss."

The librarian took the hint and withdrew. Ambrosius entered a few moments later, flushed with wine, and with a curious gleam in his oriental eyes. He had been dining at a sporting club of which he was a member and there was further entertainment in store for him later on. He accepted the chair to which Francis pointed and a cigar. In his somewhat exuberant state he was inclined to be loquacious. He had lost that awe of Francis which kept him as a rule almost tongue-tied.

"Keeping quiet to-night, eh?" he remarked, with a glance at his host's white tie and waistcoat. "Very likely you are right. Nothing else will be talked about in London to-night but the race. If the money was on," he added, with a cunning little gleam in his eyes, "it was a wonderful affair."

Francis regarded him coldly.

"I sent for you, Ambrosius," he said, "on a matter of business."

"That is quite all right," Ambrosius assented. "I

simply ventured on a very ordinary piece of gossip. It is not as though we were altogether strangers," he concluded, with a grin.

"You will do well to forget the fact," Francis enjoined, "or I may remember it to your disadvantage."

Ambrosius was disposed to be sulky. Francis took no notice, however, of his lowering brows.

"Have you seen Lord Eustace?" he enquired.

"The young man was in my rooms waiting for me when I got back from the races."

"Well?"

"I agreed to let him have five thousand pounds on his note of hand, payable on demand."

"Good. You have his acceptance?"

"In my safe."

"That makes how much that Lord Eustace owes you?" Francis asked.

"Thirty-two thousand pounds."

"And Lord Henry?"

"Twenty-seven thousand. I have your undertaking guaranteeing the payment of both amounts."

"Quite right," Francis admitted. "You will receive instructions from me as to the course of action I propose to pursue in a few days. Have you — by the bye — been approached by any other member of the family?"

"Not yet. What am I to do about Lady Monica if she comes?"

"Does she owe anything?"

"She owes a few thousands for *chemie*," Ambrosius announced. "I told them to give her credit as you desired. She has paid a portion of her losses, however. It's the future I'm thinking of. I happen to know that she backed 'Laughing Sally' heavily."

Francis was silent for several moments. Suddenly he came to a decision.

"You can let Lady Monica have such money as she requires," he said, "on this occasion only. Persuade her to borrow enough to pay what she owes at your gambling hell, or whatever you call it, and to clear herself with her bookmaker. Send me her acceptance as soon as you get it, but what I am going to tell you about Lord Eustace and Lord Henry does not apply to her, you understand?"

"I understand, certainly."

"On Monday morning," Francis continued, "you are to go to a solicitor — one of your own kidney, for choice — and issue a writ against Lord Henry and Lord Eustace for the total amount of their acceptances."

Ambrosius removed the cigar from his mouth and stared at his host for a moment in amazement.

"I say," he exclaimed, "isn't this a little bit rough? They imagine naturally that I will give them some notice before calling in loans like this."

"Never mind what they imagine. The notes are all payable on demand. You find unexpectedly that you need the money."

"But a writ!" Ambrosius protested. "Without any notice, either! It is scandalous treatment! How can I excuse myself to them?"

"I do not admit that an excuse is necessary," was the cold reply, "but if it were, you have one. Did not both Lord Henry and Lord Eustace, when you questioned them as to their means, tell you that the twenty thousand a year upon which they subsist came from a Trust Fund?"

"That's true enough," Ambrosius confessed.

"Well, it doesn't," Francis said. "It is a voluntary allowance upon my part. They haven't five hundred a year between them. That, of course, doesn't matter to you, as I am guaranteeing your advance and you probably knew their exact position. You can quote the fact that you have been deceived, however, as an excuse for your harsh action."

Ambrosius was without a doubt bewildered. He could make nothing of the matter.

"What's it all mean?" he demanded. "You don't want to make your cousin and uncle bankrupt, surely? You knew they couldn't pay."

Francis stared at his visitor with uplifted eyebrows.

"Your comprehension of this transaction is not necessary," he declared. "It remains only for you to do as you are told."

Ambrosius threw away his cigar. It was not his custom to display his feelings but he was very angry indeed.

"I shall need the acceptances," he explained, "before I can issue the writs."

"I will fetch them for you," Francis replied. "Pray look at the evening paper or help yourself to a whisky and soda. I shall have to get the keys from Mr. Moss."

He left the room. Ambrosius rose slowly to his feet and stared through the door after him. He was a man of many passions, none of which he had ever resisted. A new one had come to him within the last few minutes. His irritation against Francis had blazed into hatred. He clenched his fists.

"Mr. Ambrosius!"

He swung round. It was a woman's voice, a familiar voice, too. Lady Monica had crossed the threshold

from the small dining room and was gazing at him in surprise.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "And where is my cousin?"

Mr. Ambrosius slowly recovered himself.

"His Grace was here a minute ago," he answered. "He left me to fetch some papers. He will be back shortly. I — I had no idea there was any one else here."

Monica subsided carelessly into the easy-chair which Francis had vacated. Her opera cloak fell back. She toyed with her necklace absently.

"I wanted to see my cousin for a moment or two," she explained, "so I took advantage of my knowledge of the house to come up quietly. There is a private staircase from this suite to the hall."

"Indeed!"

Monica looked at him for a moment and he regretted his monosyllable. He also came to the conclusion that Lady Monica was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life.

"A bad race for you, Lady Monica, I am afraid," he observed sympathetically.

"Ruinous!" she admitted.

He glanced at the closed door and lowered his voice. He had had some experience of women, even of Lady Monica's station in life, who needed money.

"If any assistance on my part would be acceptable," he ventured, "I should like to remind you of what you already know."

"And what is that?"

"That I am your very devoted admirer."

She looked at him with cold curiosity.

"Isn't that just a little impertinent?"

He flushed, but he was a very emotional person and far too much under the spell of her beauty to resent the careless contempt of her words.

"I assure you that I did not mean it to be so," he declared. "My desire is to be of service to you."

He made no movement. She fancied that she detected a note of additional respect in his tone. Her manner became slightly less frigid.

"It is a coincidence that I should have met you here, Mr. Ambrosius. Only an hour ago Eustace was telling me of your wonderful generosity to him."

"I do not call it generosity to lend money to a friend," he replied. "Your brother will return it some day. Besides, I make no secret of the fact that I am a money-lender by profession, as my father was before me. He made a great fortune by it. Luckily for me: I am able to choose my clients or leave the business alone altogether if I prefer it."

"I wonder if you would like to lend me five thousand pounds?" Monica asked calmly.

Ambrosius affected more surprise than he really felt.

"You?" he exclaimed. "Well, that is rather a different matter."

"Why?"

"Your brother and father will certainly pay me back some day," he explained, "and in any case I am getting a 'quid pro quo.' Your brother has put me up for one of his clubs and your father has asked me to dine. You see, I am perfectly frank with you — I am that sort. Now as regards you, Lady Monica, have you any prospect of being able to pay me back?"

"None whatever unless I should marry a rich man," she admitted. "I suppose you'd get it some day."

"That's just a little vague, isn't it?" he pointed out. "You're not even engaged, are you?"

"Not the slightest sign of it," she acknowledged. "Matrimonially, I am afraid I am not a success. Young men mostly seem terrified of me and the middle-aged ones, this season at any rate, are all running after flappers."

Ambrosius, worthy descendant of a long line of money-getters, was a hard-headed man where business was concerned. He inherited to the fullest extent, however, the weakness of his race. He was tête-à-tête with the most beautiful and the most desirable woman he had ever known. His eyes devoured her long bare arms with their shapely beauty, her alabaster skin, the curve of her mouth about which the most famous of French artists had raved, the almost insolent grace of her slim body. He felt himself carried away.

"You can have five thousand, or fifty thousand, or five hundred thousand pounds — on terms."

"What terms?"

"Marriage," he muttered hoarsely.

There was a faint contraction of her eyebrows. She looked at him curiously.

"Marriage? Whose marriage?"

"Yours."

"To whom?"

"To me."

She threw herself back in her chair and laughed uncontrollably. He watched her as though mesmerised. She was at least, he decided, not angry.

"The idea seems to appeal to your sense of humour," he ventured.

"It certainly does," she admitted.

He drew a step nearer to her.

"Lady Monica," he begged, "why don't you think of it? I know I'm a good bit older than you, but after all I'm only forty-five and I haven't burnt the candle at both ends like most of these young fellows. Mr. Ambrosius of London may not be a very important person, but my grandfather was a well-known Greek statesman — he, or my father or I could have bought a title at any moment if we'd thought it worth while. I prefer the one I have — the one most people give me — Mr. Ambrosius, millionaire."

Monica wiped her eyes and sat up in her chair.

"I quite agree," she said. "It sounds most attractive. Are you really a millionaire?"

"I can prove it any minute you like," he declared. "I'll settle half a million upon you — cash. Lady Monica — Monica!"

He leaned towards her. His hand rested upon her bare shoulder. She sprang up with a little cry of anger.

"How dare you touch me?" she cried. "You beast!"

She held her arm tightly where he had touched it. He shrank back before the fury of her eyes. Then at the same moment they were both conscious of the fact that Francis had opened the door and was standing upon the threshold, looking in.

CHAPTER VIII

Francis closed the door behind him and advanced into the room. It was Monica who spoke first.

"Don't look so horrified, Francis," she begged. "I will explain my coming presently. Ask that person to leave, will you," she went on, pointing to Ambrosius. "He has annoyed me."

Francis rang the bell.

"What does this mean, Ambrosius?" he demanded.

"I ventured to ask Lady Monica to marry me, that's all," was the unsteady reply.

Monica laughed softly with her eyes fixed upon her cousin.

"To marry him!" she repeated ironically.

"In any case," Francis said, throwing open the door, "you perceive that your attentions are distasteful to Lady Monica. Perhaps you had better leave us."

"I shall certainly go," Ambrosius acquiesced, with a significant glance at the clock. "It would be a pity to disturb your tête-à-tête."

Neither Francis nor Monica moved. A servant made his appearance.

"Show this gentleman out," Francis directed.

Ambrosius went without a backward glance. The door was closed behind him.

"What an insufferable person!" Monica exclaimed.

"In his place, I find that he has his uses," Francis rejoined coldly.

She looked at him with a question in her eyes to which he failed to respond.

"I suppose you're shocked with me for coming to your house at this time of night," she said. "I can't help it. I had to come and I am here. It isn't your reputation which is being imperilled, anyhow."

"Please sit down," Francis begged.

"May I?" Monica asked, returning to her easy-chair. "Do you know that that brute actually touched me. If you hadn't come in, I believe that he would have tried to kiss me!"

"You are looking beautiful enough, Monica, to turn the head of a stronger man than Ambrosius," Francis observed, after a moment's pause.

Monica's whole expression suddenly softened. Her eyes shone with pleasure.

"A compliment from you, Francis!" she exclaimed. "Do you really think that I look nice? This gown is supposed to be quite wonderful. Madame declared that I was the only woman in London who could wear it and still appear respectable."

The cloak slipped from her shoulders and she stood up for a moment. To Francis's untutored eyes the gown seemed nothing but a little mist of smoke-coloured material. Yet he, too, was conscious of the daring outline; the hand of the artist which had disclosed what at the same time it concealed.

"I have never seen you look more beautiful," he admitted.

"I am glad you think so to-night."

"Why to-night?" he asked, looking down at her.

She pointed to the light which hung over the table.

"Turn that out, will you?" she begged. "It shines in my eyes, and although I am pretty hardened, I am going to say something which will make me feel horribly ashamed."

Francis obeyed her in silence. There was only one heavily shaded lamp burning. In the obscurity the beauty of her profile was almost bewildering; her eyes, which held his, were curiously bright. He felt his self-possession at peril.

"You know the time?" he reminded her.

"You needn't worry about me," she confided. "They all think that I am at Lady Panner's dance, and they won't expect me home until three o'clock. — Can you guess what I have come for?"

"No."

"I want five thousand pounds," she said slowly. "Will you give it to me?"

"I might," he answered, after a moment's pause.

"When I found Mr. Ambrosius here," she went on, "I tried to borrow it from him — after all, he is a money-lender."

"And he refused?"

"Worse," she confessed. "He asked me to marry him."

Francis's eyes flashed for a moment. He crushed down the feeling of anger, however.

"I am very ignorant of such matters," he observed quietly, "but isn't it quite a common thing nowadays for girls to marry for money?"

"Some girls, yes," she assented.

"There was a young girl of nineteen," he continued, "whom I met at your mother's reception the other evening. She seemed to be scarcely out of the school-room. Didn't some one tell me that she was married to a stockbroker of sixty, or something like that?"

"Quite true — a most repulsive person, too."

"And Lady Herington's daughter ——"

"You need not go on," she interrupted. "There are

a great many young women who sell their bodies for the badge of respectability represented by a marriage certificate and the luxury it brings. It is a common bargain nowadays."

"And you?"

"You can bear with very plain speaking?" she asked.

"Why not? Truth never offends."

"Nevertheless," she said in a low tone, "there are people who would consider the truth immodest. I don't. I shall tell you just what I feel about it. I would consider myself, body and soul, cleaner and more honest to give myself to the man for whom I was able to feel — love or passion, or whatever you may like to call it — than to marry a man I felt nothing for and pretend to give him all that a woman has to give."

"I see," he murmured.

"I must have that five thousand pounds, Francis," she went on. "Mr. Ambrosius offered it to me if I would marry him, and I felt outraged. I felt as though some one had torn the clothes from my back. I ask you to give it to me, Francis, because I am afraid of nothing."

The atmosphere of the room was suddenly stifling. It had been in the open air when last he had felt that wave of tumultuous feeling, with their car gliding through the pine-scented forest, and the twilight stealing upon them. What a struggle it had been to forget! And now — it was back again, stronger than himself, stronger than his consecrated life. He sank on his knee, and the cling of her arms around his neck seemed the sweetest thing his seared life had ever known. Their lips met.

"Monica!" he cried.

She laughed softly with her face against his.

"You don't really hate me, you know," she whispered happily. "You pretend to, but you don't."

"God knows I don't!" he acknowledged.

He drew away a moment or two later, tenderly and without haste. Monica covered her face with her hands. She was too full of emotion for any sense of triumph; too happy in those few seconds to ask herself where this might lead. She heard Francis cross the room and seat himself at the writing table. She heard the scratching of his pen.

"Where are you, Francis?" she called softly, without moving her hands.

"I am writing a cheque," he answered.

"Bother the cheque! Come back to me! Come back at once or I shall be miserable."

"One minute," he begged.

He finished his task, rose and brought the cheque across the room. He pressed it into her reluctant fingers. She held out her arms.

"Francis, after all, I am ashamed," she confessed.

"You are sorry you came?"

"No," she answered passionately. "I am glad — glad of everything. Kiss me!"

She opened her arms. Once more his world of self-renunciation fell from beneath his feet. He felt her clasped fingers around him — felt her slip so easily and sweetly into his embrace — a torrent of words — incoherent, mad words — rushed to his lips. He was scarcely conscious of the soft opening of the door. It was she who first looked round. In the half-light she could dimly discern the figure of a woman standing upon the threshold.

"Hullo, Francis! Why are you sitting in the darkness? I'm not late, am I?"

The figure at the door felt for the switch and the room was suddenly flooded with light. Peggy Layton — in a bizarre opera cloak and with jewels flashing in her hair — was suddenly revealed. She stared before her in amazement.

"I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed. "I suppose I ought not to have come up without being announced. I'm very sorry."

No one said a word. Monica rose slowly to her feet and folded her opera cloak around her shoulders. Francis, with an absolutely mechanical gesture, would have helped her, but she stepped quickly back. Suddenly she saw a crumpled-up piece of paper on the floor — the cheque. She stooped, picked it up and tore it into four pieces.

"I'm frightfully sorry," Peggy Layton declared. "You were expecting me, though, weren't you, Francis? And you told me to come up whenever I liked."

Monica moved towards the door. The newcomer stood on one side. Francis took a step forward. Then Monica spoke for the first time. She scarcely recognised her own voice. To Francis each word was horrible.

"Be so good," she begged, "as to allow me to leave here alone. I know my way perfectly."

She passed out. Francis stood, staring with fixed eyes at the door which she had closed behind her, white and motionless, filled with the horror of a sudden and terrible realisation. Peggy Layton, with a little shrug of her shoulders, tossed her cloak on the back of a chair and helped herself to a cigarette from the table. She had been afraid of Francis always and she was more than ever afraid of him now, but she had no idea of showing it.

"I'm beastly sorry, Francis," she said. "I'm sure no one downstairs knew that Lady Monica was here. She must have come up the other way. You'll be able to explain it and make everything all right."

Her words tortured him. She moved towards the chair where Monica had been sitting. He stopped her with a sharp exclamation.

"Don't sit there," he insisted almost fiercely.

She permitted herself a little grimace.

"My dear man, I'm ready to do whatever you want me to, only let's be reasonable."

"What I want you to do," he declared, "is to go."

"To go?" she repeated incredulously.

"At once, please," he insisted. "I don't want you to stay in this room."

"Because she has been here, I suppose!"

"Yes."

Peggy Layton picked up her cloak and wrapped it around her. Her self-respect had received its last blow.

"If I go," she threatened, "I shall never come back again. You know what that means."

"It is my wish," he answered. "You have served your purpose. You have made people believe what I wanted them to believe. You have done it just a little too well. Forgive me if I am discourteous. I beg you to go now."

He held the door open for her. She laughed up at him, a coquette to the end.

"I can't be angry with you, Francis," she confessed. "I have played your game and you've more than kept your word. I'm sorry if I've upset things — but I haven't really."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

He seemed to breathe more freely now that she had crossed the threshold.

"You two," she pointed out, "you belong to the same world. You'll tell her the truth and she'll know that it is the truth. Good-bye."

He closed the door after her, and stepped back into the enchanted room.

CHAPTER IX

Once more Lord Henry stood upon the hearthrug of the library at Chatfield Castle, Lady Susan sat in an easy-chair knitting, and Eustace, with his hands in his pockets, stared through the great window out across the park. This time, however, they were visitors, summoned to the interview which they had requested with the head of the house. Francis, as yet, had not made his appearance.

"I wish you'd put that damned knitting away, Susan," Lord Henry remarked irritably. "It gets on my nerves to see you working away there as though nothing had happened or was likely to happen."

"Better accustom yourself to it, Henry," his wife rejoined calmly. "There seems to be more chance than ever now that I may be doing it for a living next week."

"Rubbish! I wonder where the devil Francis is!"

"Rotten bad form to keep us waiting like this," Eustace grumbled.

"Francis is in the oak room talking to Sir Stephen," Lady Susan confided. "I saw them through the window as we passed."

"I suppose he'll see us," Lord Henry ruminated.

"Oh, he'll see us right enough," Eustace muttered. "The only question is whether his seeing us will do us any good. We got it pretty straight from Sir Stephen, you know. He doesn't believe you'll be able to touch Francis for a sixpence."

"I must confess that I am looking forward to the

interview with some apprehension," Lord Henry admitted.

"I can't think how we all drifted into such an infernal mess," Eustace remarked gloomily.

"When this is all over," his mother sighed, "I don't think you'll scoff quite so much at my little shop in Bond Street. Thank goodness, silk jumpers are coming in again."

"After all," Lord Henry pointed out, "the fellow is head of the family, although he's made such a hash of things. He can't see us both in the bankruptcy court. — I wish Monica wouldn't wander off like this. Somehow I feel that she understands him better than any of us."

"There was a time," Lady Susan reflected, "when I felt quite sure that Monica would be the means of bringing us into closer touch with this strange young man."

"Well, you can give up the idea once and for all," Eustace said dismally. "She can't even bear to hear his name mentioned. She's pretending now that she wants to talk to Mr. Moss, just to keep out of the way."

"When does Monica leave us?" her father enquired.

"Not for another ten days or so," Lady Susan replied. "She is joining Grace at Mentone."

"I take off my hat to Monica," Eustace declared, with a note of genuine admiration in his tone. "If any one had told me that it was possible to touch Aunt Grace for a cool five thou I should have thought that he was a raving lunatic. Why, I remember down at Cowes two years ago, I wanted a pony to pay my hotel bill, and she was quite stuffy about it."

"You must remember," his mother reminded him, "that Monica is practically going to take charge of

her aunt. She is spending the whole of the winter at Mentone with her, then taking her to Marienbad."

"She'll have paid a pretty stiff price for her five thou before she's finished if she has to cart Aunt Grace about for the rest of her life," Eustace observed, turning away from the window. "Well, we shall soon be out of our agony now. They're coming along the terrace."

Lady Susan glanced at the clock.

"The same time and the same month as when Francis paid us his first visit."

"And a rotten time we've had of it ever since!" Eustace groaned. "On the whole, I think Francis has only himself to thank for the mess we're in. He kept on making it as easy as possible for us to get more money. Whoever could have guessed, though, that this fellow Ambrosius would have turned out such a blackguard? Monica's fault, that, I suppose."

"I attach no blame whatever to your sister," Lord Henry declared. "Any idea of a union between her and Mr. Ambrosius would have been most repugnant to me."

"That's all very well," Eustace grumbled, "but I don't see why she need have offended him."

"That sort of person takes offence so easily," his mother sighed. "Just think how careful we always have to be at the tenants' yearly festivities. Only last Christmas Mr. Grimes, the butcher, left in a huff, because I forgot one of his dances."

"I remember that," Lord Henry said. "Impertinent fellow sent in his bill the next week! — How are you, Francis? How are you, Sir Stephen?" he added, as the two men stepped in through the terrace window. "We're here in good time, you see."

Francis nodded to the two men and, crossing the room, raised his aunt's fingers to his lips. Then he looked around with a frown.

"Monica is well, I trust?"

"Nobody ever knows when there is anything the matter with Monica," Lady Susan replied. "She seems very tired. You know, I suppose, that she is going to spend the winter with her aunt."

"I have heard nothing."

"My sister is Monica's godmother," Lady Susan continued. "She has recently come to Monica's assistance in some financial embarrassments, and in return I think the dear child is going to devote some time to her."

"And God help her!" Eustace exclaimed fervently.

"I cannot remember, Francis," his aunt observed, "whether you ever met my sister Grace. She is, I am afraid, rather a trying person."

"I once had that pleasure," he admitted. "I gathered that she was an invalid."

"An invalid of the Bath cum Cheltenham cum Carlsbad type," Eustace explained. "Too fat to live and too frightened to die. She is attended already by three chows, a vinegary-faced companion and a sort of John Brown major-domo to whom she'll probably leave all her spare cash. There's no doubt about it, Monica's paying a thousand per cent. for her money."

There was a brief pause. Lord Henry cleared his throat portentously.

"We must offer you our congratulations, Francis," he declared. "I see that the stewards have very wisely taken a reasonable view of 'Grey Lady's' success."

"So I understand," Francis admitted drily. "I believe, though, that half the people who frequent race courses still believe that I am a sharper."

His uncle frowned.

"I am convinced that you are mistaken. Whenever a Chatfield has owned a racing stable the horses have been run first for sport and secondly for the public. Your grandfather's first Derby was the most popular win of his generation."

"I suppose I am the first of the family who has ever been 'warned off'," Francis observed.

Lord Henry shuddered.

"Oblige me, nephew, by not making use of such extreme phrases." he begged. "The hint you received from the stewards to await their decision does not amount to anything so drastic."

Francis turned away from the window with a slight smile.

"My stay here is a very short one," he remarked. "It would gratify me to see Monica."

"By all means, by all means," Lord Henry acquiesced, ringing the bell. "She came up with us, but I think she is talking to Mr. Moss. Very good you've been to that fellow, Francis. — Parkins, ask Lady Monica to step this way," he added to the servant who had answered his summons.

"Mr. Moss is an excellent librarian," Francis said coldly. "I like so far as possible to treat people according to their deserts."

"Just so," his uncle agreed nervously. "I think, Sir Stephen," he added, turning to the lawyer who was talking to Lady Susan, "that it would be as well to explain to Francis the exact reason why we have asked for this interview."

"As briefly as possible, if you please," the latter enjoined.

"Precisely," Lord Henry acceded. "It has become

necessary — er — to lay certain facts before you — facts which, I am sure, that for the honour of the house you will consider seriously."

Francis seated himself in a high-backed chair a little away from the general circle.

"Let me hear them," he begged.

"Sir Stephen will explain our position," Lord Henry murmured.

"The affair lies in a nutshell," the lawyer pronounced, rising to his feet and standing by Lord Henry's side on the hearthrug. "Lord Henry and Lord Eustace are both in serious financial trouble. They have consulted me and announced their desire to lay the position before you. As legal adviser to the family they have asked me to put you in possession of certain facts."

"I am prepared to listen," Francis announced in a colourless tone.

"Lord Henry has been indiscreet in his expenditures, and your Cousin Eustace has been backing the wrong horses," Sir Stephen continued. "Notwithstanding your generous allowance, they both needed to borrow money. They were introduced — I think by you, in the first place — to Mr. Ambrosius, whose very extraordinary behaviour has placed them in their present grave position."

"Extraordinary behaviour?" Francis repeated questioningly.

"I think that even you will admit that to be a mild term. Mr. Ambrosius, apparently anxious to stand well with the various members of your family, seems to have almost encouraged your uncle and your cousin here to borrow money, asking for no security and lending it on note of hand only. No time for repayment

was fixed, so no default has really occurred. Yet, last week he seems to have taken the most extraordinary action. He has issued writs against both of them for the whole amount of their indebtedness. This action of his is presumably due to some imagined slight offered him by one of the family."

"What are the amounts concerned?" Francis asked.

"I must confess that they are reprehensibly heavy," Sir Stephen admitted. "Lord Henry here appears to owe the man twenty-seven thousand pounds and Eustace about thirty-two thousand."

"I thought that 'Laughing Sally' was a cert," Eustace declared ruefully. "I was on at nine to one, too."

"Your own indebtedness seems rather large, Lord Henry," Francis observed. "You don't bet, do you?"

"The amount of my own indebtedness has been a constant source of amazement to me, I must confess," his uncle admitted. "I fear that I must be somewhat extravagant. The cost of maintaining two establishments also in these days is considerable."

"To which two do you refer?" Francis enquired.

Lord Henry for a moment was speechless. Fortunately Lady Susan intervened.

"The Dower House here, which you have been kind enough to let us consider as our country home and the house we have rented in Charles Street — two very large establishments, Francis, although your allowances have been most generous. I can assure you that the books for some months have made my heart ache. The price of bacon alone ——"

"I do not think that Lord Henry's twenty-seven thousand pounds has gone in bacon," Francis interrupted.

Lord Henry frowned covertly at his nephew.

"I must retrench — I certainly will retrench," he promised. "In particular there is one little extravagance I undertake to abandon."

"You refer," Francis began —

"Dad means the two cars," Eustace interrupted.

"Quite so. As a matter of fact, I think that we ought to try and do at present without a car at all. One can hire in London so easily nowadays."

"Was Francis referring to motor cars?" Lady Susan asked, looking at them over her spectacles.

"Of course, my dear, of course," her husband assured her.

"Didn't you hear him say so?" Eustace demanded.

The door was quietly opened and Monica entered. Francis gripped the sides of his chair for a moment before he rose. It was their first meeting since the night of that amazing medley of passion and tragedy in his rooms at Chatfield House. There was no change in her expression, scarcely any in her demeanour. She nodded indifferently to Francis and settled herself comfortably in an easy-chair.

"How are you, dear Cousin?" she murmured. "Why am I summoned to this family conclave?"

"At my wish," Francis rejoined a little harshly. "Your father and brother have sent for me to tell me of their difficulties. It is my desire that you should hear my reply to them."

"How very mysterious!" she exclaimed. "I scarcely see, though, why I should be dragged into it."

"Every member of this family is concerned in what I have to say," Francis assured her.

"The family," his uncle reminded him, "of which you happen to be the head."

"Nominally," Francis admitted. "I am now going

to tell you all why I yielded to Sir Stephen's persuasions and came back from Pellini to live this life of tawdriness and shams and call myself Duke of Chatfield. I came back for one reason and with one intention — to bring as much disgrace, dishonour, and infamy as I could upon the House of Chatfield."

There was a brief silence. Everyone except Sir Stephen showed signs of amazement. The fall of Lady Susan's knitting was in its way almost dramatic.

"I knew there was something queer about the fellow," Eustace muttered half to himself.

"Isn't this rather like fouling your own nest?" the lawyer asked coldly. "You cannot escape from the fact that you yourself are the head of the family."

"The titular head; no more, I can assure you," Francis declared. "I ask you all — have I, during the period of my residence in England, behaved in any way as though I were proud of my name and position? Think! I have been dragged into a police court in the early morning, muddy and dishevelled, and fined the maximum amount and costs for taking part in what was described as a drunken brawl. I have set every sporting paper in the country casting aspersions upon my honesty. I have been seen at public places with disreputable people. I have encouraged you all to continue in your little vicious circles. You were not deep enough in the mire when I made my first appearance here. That is why I made your allowances unnecessarily large. I wanted you where you are now. Ambrosius, your philanthropic money-lender, millionaire though he may be, was my puppet, luring you on to borrow at my orders. You have sent for me to tell me that there are writs out against you for every penny you've ever had from him. You might have

spared yourselves the trouble. Those writs were issued, not in a fit of pique as you imagine, but at my orders. In a fortnight's time you, Lord Henry, and you, Eustace, will be in the bankruptcy court. From to-day I stop your allowances. Sir Stephen will pay to Lady Susan two thousand, and to Lady Monica, a thousand a year. To you men not a penny. You must either work, or become pensioners upon your womenfolk."

Whatever they had expected or feared this was more terrible both in the substance and the telling. A sort of frozen horror seemed to settle upon the little company. Monica was the only one who showed no signs of discomposure.

"After all," she admitted, "I am glad that you sent for me — dear Cousin Francis. This sidelight upon your somewhat elusive personality is, to say the least of it, interesting. I don't suppose you need me to tell you that I decline to touch a penny of your money."

"So do I," Lady Susan declared firmly. "I shall start my little shop in Bond Street."

Monica rose to her feet in leisurely fashion and came to the hearthrug, facing Francis. She looked at him steadily.

"This interesting but rather melodramatic scene," she said, "takes me back to the evening when we first met upon the ramparts of Pellini. You spoke then with a somewhat virulent eloquence of your hatred for some one or other — our family, I suppose. What wrong have you suffered from us? You were spared the obvious one — unfortunately, as it would seem."

"Do you really wish to know?" he asked.

"I am extremely curious," she assured him.

Francis followed Monica's example and also rose to his feet. His action seemed less one of courtesy than

a desire to accept the challenge which she had thrust upon him. His eyes were lit with sombre fires.

"You will no doubt," he said, "discover more melodrama still in the story I propose to tell. You will also, however, hear truth."

CHAPTER X

Four of the people in the great library hung with obvious absorption upon the words of the young man who had at last thrown concealment aside. Monica alone listened with a sort of contemptuous toleration. As for Francis himself, the note of passion which had trembled in his tone a few minutes before had gone. He had become the leisurely narrator of a page of family history.

"Twenty-seven years ago," he began, "Francis William, seventh Duke of Chatfield, travelled in Italy in becoming state: a painter, a dilettante, something of an archeologist, something of a man of fashion. At Pellini he met my grandfather and his daughter, my mother. My grandfather was the sole remaining member of the family of Pellini — a family as noble at least as the race of Chatfield. His daughter, my mother, was beautiful, well-educated, and had indeed made her bow at the Court of her Queen. But they were poor, these two, miserably poor. They lived on the last of their small farms. Their little pressing of wine, their olives and their figs were almost all they had to subsist upon. It was an easy conquest for Francis, Duke of Chatfield. Without a doubt my mother loved him or she would never have consented — but I anticipate. My grandfather died. My mother was left alone in the world. She disappeared with Francis Chatfield. They apparently went to Rome and were married there. No one heard of their marriage. My father, although he must have known what was in the minds

of every one, seems to have taken particularly good care to have breathed no word of the ceremony to a living soul. Presently he brought his wife back to a small villa near Pellini where he established her. There I was born. There, through the years, he visited her stealthily and furtively. She had no friends. The world took her at the valuation which my father's ghastly selfishness imposed upon her. There she lived and there she died, without a single one of the compensations to which, as Duchess of Chatfield, she was entitled. My father spent, perhaps, two months of the year with her, sometimes less. She prayed to be taken to England. He always made excuses. She prayed to be introduced to his family, to be given her proper position. He evaded her with some falsehoods as to her religion. So she grew older and tired through sheer loneliness. The women of those southern races need love more even than you cold English people. She withered for the lack of it and died. My father was not present even at the funeral. He faded from that day out of my life. There was a little money — enough to educate me at the common schools — and a condition that I should never come to England until I was sent for. That is how Francis William, seventh Duke of Chatfield, treated the woman whom he married. That is how he fulfilled his deathbed trust to that poor worn-out Italian aristocrat. That is the tender consideration he showed to me, his son; leaving me to be brought up nameless, to watch the tragedy of my mother's waning days. — Things are, I hope, a little clearer to you all now."

"Nevertheless," Lord Henry said gloomily, "he married your mother."

"And why?" Francis demanded. "Because he was

a man so spoiled that existence was impossible to him unless he had his own way, and she would become his on no other terms. And listen to this: I would rather a thousand times that he had brought me into the world a bastard and given my mother the love for lack of which she faded and died, than that he should have gone through that cold little ceremony which made me Duke of Chatfield and her a weary, neglected saint. Can you realise the smallness of the man? He resented the price he paid for her; brooded over it until his love grew cold and her heart was broken."

"There is at least one thing to be remembered," Sir Stephen urged. "Your father went out one morning a strong man and was brought home at night with a broken neck. We have no right to assume that he did not mean at some time or another to send for you and disclose his secret."

Francis turned towards the lawyer.

"You were his confidential adviser, were you not?" he asked.

"I was."

"Did he ever tell you that he was married?"

"He did not," Sir Stephen admitted reluctantly.

Francis shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"He had plenty of time," he said. "A good many years, if you come to reckon them up."

"Francis," Lord Henry pleaded, "this is a terrible story but I am an old man. Bankruptcy would kill me."

"It would make it impossible for me to get a job," Eustace groaned.

Francis looked at them both, unmoved.

"What do your lives or your futures matter to me?" he demanded coldly. "My mother died at

twenty-nine. She, who should be sitting in that chair," he added, pointing to where Lady Susan's forgotten knitting lay at her feet, "Duchess of Chatfield, an honour to her name, as she most certainly would have been. What do I care what becomes of the whole brood of you? Interlopers! Selfish, fawning parasites, glutted with luxury, without a thought in your minds except how to amuse yourselves until to-morrow! She died in a cheap villa, on a bare hillside, without enough money to buy the flowers for the garden she loved, with a few books, a few pictures, a little music, a sunset now and then to watch. She lived beautifully and she died of a broken heart, because of the foul selfishness and pig-headed pride of Francis William, seventh Duke of Chatfield."

His almost unnatural composure had for the moment deserted him. His voice shook, his eyes blazed. He moved to the bell and rang it, motioning with his hand towards the door.

"Now, for the second time," he continued, "and this time for ever — out, all of you! — out of my house! Find your way where you will, how you will, but out! Leave this room! Leave me alone — or anything may happen!"

Lord Henry was almost a man again. He assisted his wife to rise.

"My dear," he enjoined, "we must do as this young man says. Eustace, come with us. After all, others have had to face worse things. The workhouse is better than the guillotine."

Lady Susan patted her husband's hand.

"Don't worry, dear," she begged. "My little shop will see us all through."

They left the room. It was almost a dignified de-

parture. Francis waited until the door was closed. Then he turned to Monica, who, some time previously, had sunk into the chair which she seemed now indisposed to leave.

"Lady Monica," he began.

"Dear Cousin Francis," she replied mockingly.

"I thought that I had made my wishes clear."

"So few of us know what is good for us," she sighed. "It seems to me that you have been alone a great deal too much already."

"I desire to talk to Sir Stephen," he told her stiffly.

"Go on, then! I sha'n't interfere."

"Our conversation will be private."

"I sha'n't listen," she promised.

The lawyer intervened with some diffidence.

"Lady Monica, may I say just one word? Whatever you may think of your cousin's attitude, and however much you may resent it, the fact remains that he is master here."

"What do you think of it?" she demanded.

"I can only answer you," Sir Stephen rejoined, "by saying that my sole object in waiting is to place my resignation in his Grace's hands. I have no desire to administer further the affairs of the house."

"Because I mete out justice!" Francis protested scornfully.

"Justice before a self-appointed tribunal and pronounced by a self-appointed judge," Sir Stephen declared vigorously. "No sane man would approve of your attitude."

Monica rose deliberately to her feet.

"Shall I tell you what I think?" she asked. "That was really what I stayed behind for."

"If you choose," he replied coldly.

"I think," she pronounced, speaking without anger, and with a slow tantalising smile, "that you are an intolerant, melodramatic figure of misery, vindictive and idiotic, simply because those years in your cell have warped all sense of proportion in your mind. Fate has made it possible for you to deal out suffering with a liberal hand. As soon as you have done it, you will repent. I really cannot be very angry with you. You are of the stuff monks are made of — not men. Good-by, dear Cousin Francis. You see you are going to have your way. I am leaving you. Good-by, Francis!"

She moved lightly across the room, looking back from the threshold with a little wave of the hand. They were all gone now. His moment of triumph was over. As she passed down the hall, Monica was singing a bar or two of the song with which she had first tormented him at Pellini.

CHAPTER XI

Monica, on the morning of her twice-deferred departure for Mentone, suddenly yielded to an unaccountable impulse. She dressed for her journey an hour or two before it was necessary and walked swiftly across to the great empty house at the corner of Grosvenor Square. She was admitted with very little delay. Johnson himself came hurrying from the back regions to greet her.

"Any news of his Grace, my lady?" he enquired anxiously.

Monica shook her head.

"We have heard nothing," she said.

For a single moment she felt her errand difficult. Johnson stood before her in an attitude of deferential interest.

"I had a fancy," she explained, "before I left England, to have a look at the tapestries in the room which his Grace kept for himself."

"If you will allow me, my lady," Johnson answered, turning around.

She followed him to the suite cut off from the rest of the house, followed him along the darkened hallway and corridors, through silent rooms covered with brown holland. The suite itself, however, seemed to have been kept in preparation for immediate occupancy. It was almost a shock to her to find how everything had been left exactly as she remembered it. There was the little dining room with its plain cream-coloured walls

and fine oak furniture, the study beyond, which she entered with beating heart, where the tapestries hung and where there still remained faint evidences of masculine occupation. She looked around her, amazed at the poignancy of the memories which swept into her mind. The room was extraordinarily reminiscent of its owner. There were one or two priceless tapestries, a few delightful bronzes, a couple of water colours, a strange "Old Master." There was the chair where she had sat, the curtain which Peggy Layton had lifted at her entrance. Idiocy! There was an atmosphere still lingering here which, from the first, should have stifled all her resentment; an atmosphere almost of austerity, of simple and selective elegance in the hangings and appointments of the room, its carefully chosen and priceless ornaments.

"I should like to look into his Grace's bedchamber," Monica remarked. "It opens out from here, does it not?"

Johnson bowed in silence and threw open another door. A little exclamation of surprise broke from Monica's lips as she crossed the threshold. There was a plain bedstead, a very beautifully carved shrine upon the wall, two exquisite masterpieces of the Virgin, one a reputed, the other a genuine Perugino, and nothing else, except the wardrobes let into the walls. The floor was uncarpeted, the walls plainly distempered. It was the bedchamber of an anchorite, except for the strange beauty of the two paintings, the beautiful carving of the shrine, before which she noticed with some surprise a bowl of fresh flowers. She pointed to them. Johnson coughed, a little embarrassed.

"His Grace used to arrange these himself, my lady," he explained. "Somehow or other, since he has been

away, with the idea that he might return at any moment, I have taken the liberty."

Monica stepped back into the study. She sank into the chair in which she had sat so short a time ago and fancied that heaven itself was descending to her. Almost, again, she could imagine that the atmosphere of the room was filled with the thrilling and wonderful music to which she had listened during those few minutes for the first time in life.

"You miss your master, Johnson?" she asked presently.

"Any one who had been privileged to know his Grace intimately, my lady," the man replied, "would miss him."

She looked at him with suddenly moistened eyes.

"There are a great many people in the world, Johnson," she sighed, "who speak ill of his Grace."

"Those are the people who did not know him, my lady," was the confident reply.

She waved her hand.

"You can go," she said. "I shall be down in a few minutes. I had an hour to spare and I had a fancy to look at these tapestries again."

Johnson lingered upon the threshold.

"Your ladyship cannot tell us," he enquired wistfully, "if there is any news of his Grace — any likelihood of his return?"

"We have heard nothing," Monica replied. "It seems rather unlikely."

She was left alone for a time. Her eyes were fixed upon the tapestries which were, indeed, very priceless and very wonderful, but she saw nothing of them. She saw instead the outline of a dark figure at the desk opposite. She heard the scratching of a pen. Once

again she felt that strange compelling conviction that victory was almost within her grasp. The glory of the world had come so near, swept away by a single moment of banality; a moment over which she knew in her heart that she should have triumphed. In his absence the truth seemed so much easier to comprehend. She realised so completely how far he had remained above the weaknesses he had made use of. His enmity, his cruelty, his unscrupulousness seemed all of a sudden pitiful; by sheer will he had carried them with him to the climax, only to abandon them like pestilence when the hour had struck. What she had missed!

"I beg your ladyship's pardon."

She looked round, summoned back into the world which for a moment she had forgotten. Mr. Moss, untidy, blinking nervously behind his spectacles, was standing in an apologetic attitude just inside the door.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon," he repeated. "I ventured to intrude to ask if there was any news of his Grace."

"None that I know of," was Monica's regretful reply.

Mr. Moss's disappointment was manifest. She looked at him kindly.

"You are not under any apprehension, I hope, as to your position, Mr. Moss?" she asked.

"Indeed, no, your ladyship," he assured her. "His Grace has arranged for me to remain here during my lifetime, and for a pension when I choose to retire. Johnson has been treated in the same way. It is not for ourselves that we think; it is that we desire to see his Grace back again."

Suddenly Monica saw the little man with new eyes. He had become a human being.

"You found my cousin a kind master?"

Mr. Moss's voice shook.

"His Grace was the most sympathetic employer and the most wonderful scholar with whom I have ever been privileged to converse, my lady," he declared. "He was kindness itself. And I would undertake to say," he went on, his voice becoming stronger, almost truculent, "that there is not a man in London to-day whose knowledge of modern Latin exceeds his Grace's."

Monica rose abruptly to her feet.

"I wish he were back again, Mr. Moss," she confessed. "I am afraid he was not very happy here. I don't think any of us quite understood."

She made her escape somehow. She had looked upon this visit with some self-disdain as a pandering to sentiment, to a weakness of which she was half ashamed. She came away with a strangely altered outlook. Her glimpse of Francis's rooms, their faint atmosphere of austere beauty, the worship of Mr. Moss and his servant had shaken her. She turned into the park, anxious for a few minutes' solitude. Felicia Dringe passed by, side by side with Mr. Ambrosius in a very wonderful Rolls-Royce. They both looked at her tentatively. Monica's eyes travelled through them and beyond. There was a sob in her throat as she realised how her feet had clung to the earth; how little she had understood. The rain was coming down, the chairs were all turned on end, the walks were deserted. She stood for a short time under the trees, listening to the pattering on the leaves overhead. The people who came and vanished into the grey mist were like ghosts. Yet her imagination triumphed. She saw the place as it had always seemed to her — the playground of idle moments, the rendezvous for countless assignations, the

scene of numberless small flirtations, one of the coloured pages of the passing day. Then, suddenly, she knew that nothing in the past counted at all except this memory; that nothing in the future would ever count — unless —— She glanced at her watch. Her train left at eleven o'clock for Calais. The spirit of adventure thrilled her pulses. There might yet be time — and life, after all, held but one supreme joy!

CHAPTER XII

Monica never forgot that midnight ride across the plain from Florence, the paling of the moon and the hour of gloom before the dawn, when the lights of Pellini seemed mingled with the stars and the whole country shapeless and blurred. A curious uneasiness had seized her in Florence, where she had purposed to spend the night, and had driven her out on to the final stage of her journey — an uneasiness which grew almost into panic as, with the coming of dawn, the country spread itself out before her, the houses and trees took to themselves shape, and as they panted round the hairpin corners of the hill of Pellini the harsh clanging of the monastery bell broke the stillness of the dawn. She had a feeling that after all she would be too late; that once more the door in the wall would have opened and closed before she reached the ramparts. With the last ascent, however, her fears vanished. A man was kneeling, very much in the same position that she had first seen Francis. The monastery doors were closed. The organ was silent. The procession of the monks had not yet been formed.

She stopped the car at the last bend and continued her journey on foot. As she approached him, the kneeling man rose to his feet. He stared at Monica as though she were something unreal, at the car whose engine was still throbbing and back again at Monica. She, for her part, was confused. The worshipper was a stranger to her — a peasant, apparently, from his worn clothes and scanty linen. He muttered something which she failed to understand. Then she remembered

the action of the country people who had passed Francis at his devotions. She made the sign of the cross, bent her head, and retreated to the car. The man returned to his devotions.

At Pellini she ordered breakfast at the hotel and sent for the landlord. In reply to her questions he became at once eloquent.

"Yes, indeed, signorina," he told her, "the *Inglese* returned here but recently. There has been much talk about him. He has been the hero of a great romance. News came, signorina, whilst he was in the monastery with those others, that he had inherited the estates of an English nobleman. They say that he was loath to go, but he went. For many months he disappeared."

"But he has returned you say?" Monica asked eagerly.

"Without a doubt, signorina," the man assured her. "Only last week he returned. He is at the villa where he lived when a boy with his mother, on the road to Ejjecio — a matter of four kilometres, perhaps. If the signorina desires to visit him she will permit that I speak to her chauffeur? He shall be directed."

For the first time Monica's courage failed her for a moment as she drove up a little avenue of cypresses at the end of which stood the plain, bald-looking villa which had been pointed out to her. The avenue itself was in shocking condition; the whole place unkempt and uncared for. The garden, visible as soon as they reached the end of the drive, had run absolutely wild. The windows were all curtainless; the grounds beyond had a deserted and miserable appearance. The only attractive feature about it was a small terrace round which a wisteria shrub and a few roses had twined themselves. At the further end of this oasis Francis

was seated — or rather had been seated — breakfasting. He came towards her like a man wakened out of a dream, unsteady on his feet, large-eyed with wonder, his whole being tremulous with the dawn of a beatific amazement.

"Monica!" he exclaimed.

"Here I am," she replied, stepping from the car. "What a journey! And couldn't you borrow a steam roller for your avenue? I'm shaken to bits."

He still looked at her as though she were something unreal.

"Why have you come here?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

"Doesn't that sound a little inhospitable," she protested, "or is it my fancy? I'm on my way to Mentone — perhaps."

"But what do you want?" he repeated gravely. "Is there anything I forgot?"

"You forgot me!"

He ignored her amazing reply and her almost maddening smile. He disappeared for a moment through the cracked French glass window and brought out a chair. She motioned him to take it to the other end of the terrace where he had been breakfasting.

"I'll sit with you," she said. "What delicious oranges!"

He continued to question her, although with a curious note of impersonality.

"What did I forget?" he ruminated. "I destroyed all the promissory notes. I reinstated the allowances. I left the fullest instructions and authority with Sir Stephen. I thought I had finished with everything that could ever remind me of those terrible months."

"You were magnificent!" Monica declared, taking

an orange from the dish and peeling it absently. "Magnificent in your folly, in your anger, and in your reparation, but, as I said before, you forgot me!"

"Have you come here to torture me?" he demanded.

"My dear Cousin Francis, no," she assured him. "I've come to breakfast. Could we have another omelet, and I like my coffee a little stronger."

He seemed about to speak, but changed his mind. Once more he disappeared through the window and this time he was absent for several minutes. When he returned he found Monica comfortably established, with her hat hanging from the rail of the balcony.

"The old woman who looks after me," he announced, "will do her best. Monica, you must tell me why you've come."

"My dear man," she replied, holding out her hands to him, "isn't it perfectly obvious? I've come to stay."

"To stay?" he repeated. "You — with me — here!"

"That was rather my idea," she admitted. "Don't look so terrified, Francis. We can get married or something, can't we — only, after breakfast — I insist upon it that we have breakfast first. I can smell the omelet."

She felt the grip of his hands upon her shoulders; his eyes were questioning her fiercely.

"This is the second time I've come to you," she reminded him. "You drove me away before — or rather that horrid little cat of a Peggy Layton did. You won't drive me away this time, Francis?"

His arms were closing around her. Belief was coming to him.

"Because you mustn't ever drive me away, please," she went on. "It's a terrible thing to say without

being asked, Francis, isn't it — but I love you, dear! I have never loved any one else. I never could love any one else. May I stay?"

"May you stay!" he faltered passionately. "You!" —

Later in the day, as they passed the monastery on their way to Florence, she told him of the penitent she had surprised that morning. He smiled at her fears.

"I never had any idea of going back there," he declared. "What I was going to do with myself, I can't imagine — certainly not that. I expect, when it was too late, I should have started round Europe, hat in hand, in search of you."

"Perhaps it would have been better if I had waited," she suggested thoughtfully.

"What a horrible idea," he laughed. "Besides," he went on, a moment or two later, "if you had waited, I should have missed the most wonderful moment of my life."

"And I, the best omelet," she murmured.

The monastery bell began to clang as they reached the plain. They both looked backwards. Francis shivered. She passed her arm through his.

"Don't think of it, dear," she begged. "Life is going to be anything but an abstraction for you in the future."

"I know it," he replied. "I've got to go back and live down the memory of that horrible predecessor of mine — that dissipated fellow who won races with the wrong horses and took young ladies to the wrong restaurants. I've a lot to live down, haven't I?"

"Quite easy," she assured him — "with me to help!"

THE END

FRANCISCA CLUB

Interloper
1927

Oppenheim, EP